



THE CHRISTMAS CHRONICLES

THE
SILENT
NIGHT

A SLEEPING BEAUTY RETELLING

SARAH BERAN

THE SILENT NIGHT



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Book Cover by Karri Klawiter

For Nehemiah,
who has one of the most generous hearts I have known

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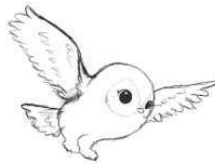
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Chapter One

*'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.*



The silence was deafening.

After so many years, Holly should have been accustomed to the way the dark night pressed down upon her or the way the empty halls echoed with the sound of nothing as she walked through on slippered feet. She should have come to expect the tall, flickering shadows caused by her lone candle to be swallowed up by the darkness of the high, arched ceilings, or been prepared for the overwhelming feeling of loneliness that crashed over her as she moved from one unoccupied room to the next.

But even after all these years, Holly was still not used to it.

“First things first,” her voice tried valiantly to overpower the oppressive silence of the night. “I need to find food, and then I should make sure that the windows are open for What and Why. I wonder if Who has a letter for me today?”

Holly glided along the worn track on the floor, her feet moving as lightly as if she were a spirit of the air. She held the candle out in front of her, cupping it with one hand to ensure that the tiny flame was not extinguished by her forward momentum. The moon was half-full, which meant that if the candle did go out, she should still have enough light to find her way around. In truth, on all but the nights of the new moon, Holly didn’t really need the candle to see. Her eyes had grown accustomed to the low light, even if her mind had not.

But the darkness only made the silence louder, so she kept the candle lit.

The long stone hallway stretched out before her, with cold, gray stone floors and walls broken up by dusty tapestries and faded, tattered rugs. Tall windows made up of diamond panes of glass ran at regular intervals, allowing the moonlight to filter through and affording a clear view of the sparkling stars in a dark, velvety sky. Frosty remains of a previous snow still clung to the outside window sills, with feathered fractals that spread up and across the lower panes in an icy web.

At the next juncture, Holly turned to the right and followed another long corridor until she came to a set of stairs. The narrow, circular staircase was nearly identical to the one on the other side of the castle that led to her room, with uneven steps and

no railing—a final means of defense if enemies were to ever breach the walls. After so many years, Holly knew the stairs by heart, and she floated down just as easily as she had walked the level floor of the hall.

A few minutes later she walked into the large, empty kitchen. Using the soft circle of her candlelight, she maneuvered her way around the shadowy boxes of counters and worktables until she came to the dark, open doorway of the larder. She bypassed the empty barrels and crates and went straight to a set of shelves along the side, where a collection of potatoes stood arranged in neat rows.

“Tubers it is,” Holly announced, examining the row of reddish-brown globes. “Unless What has found something else. Ha! Tuber.” She switched to a low, gruff tone. “Shall we take *tuber* three of them, Your Highness? Get it? Like ‘two or three’?”

She tapped a finger against her chin and tilted her head towards the ceiling, considering. Her voice returned to normal. “I think two will be plenty. I doubt the Parliament will want potatoes, and it would be a pity to let any go to waste.”

With two potatoes in one hand and the candle in another, Holly turned gracefully on her heel and strode back to the center of the kitchen. As if on cue, a rattling, tapping sound came from one of the windows. She set her dinner down on the large table and crossed to the window, sliding it open with only a little difficulty.

Cold, crisp air immediately kissed her skin, and Holly inhaled deeply. The clean air was laced with the promise of snow, though on this side of the castle no clouds yet blocked her view of the moon—or at least, what she could see of the moon through the thick layer of holly branches. The spiky leaves covered most of the window, leaving only a small opening in the center.

Holly reached out and pushed some of the leaves to the side. “It’s open!”

Her words were answered by the loud hoot of an owl and the soft whirring of feathers as a small, snowy white owl flew in through the window and alighted on the table beside her potatoes after dropping the bundle of twigs it held in its feathered feet. Two more followed in quick succession, one joining the first on the table with a solid thud. The other landed on her shoulder, depositing a folded piece of thick parchment in her hands. A frisson of warmth wrapped around her heart as Holly tucked it away in her pocket for later.

“Good evening, Who,” Holly cooed, reaching up to gently stroke the soft feathers of the bird on her shoulder. “And What and Why; always a pleasure to see you.”

What hooted, ruffling his feathers and kicking one of the twigs towards her.

“And of course, thank you for the gifts. You are such a kind and clever owl, aren’t you?”

Not to be outdone, Why fluttered over and dropped a sprig of rosemary into her hand.

“Why, thank you! This will go perfectly with my potatoes—but you already knew that, didn’t you?”

Both owls hooted proudly as Holly made a small fire and set a small pot of water from the cistern to boil. Her potatoes went in, along with the rosemary and a sprinkling of salt. She carried on a steady stream of conversation with her feathered companions as she worked.

“Where are the others tonight? It’s been a while since we’ve had a full quorum. Though I suppose the weather might keep them busy. Do you think we’ll have much snow this time?”

“I’ve been reading about crop rotation—I know, such riveting material—and I’m thinking that it would be a good idea to implement in the greenhouses. Of course, Nic might have already thought of it, but perhaps it’s worth mentioning.”

"I had the most peculiar dream last night. Or was it this morning? Evening? Oh bother, it's so hard to know what to call it. Anyway, in my dream there was this big bowl of sugared plums. We used to always have them this time of year, you know. But there was a loud sound, and I dropped the bowl, spilling the plums all over the floor. And do you know what happened? Those sugar plums began to *dance*! It was really the most ridiculous thing."

Holly drained the potatoes and set them, steaming, into a bowl to cool while she filled a glass with water from the cistern. It was refilled regularly through a cleverly positioned gutter that ran from the roof, collecting both rainwater and melting snow. She ate by candlelight, huddled next to the small flame for brightness and warmth while the three snowy owls watched her with their bright, golden eyes.

"I'm sorry, dears," she said around a mouthful of hot potato. "I would offer you some, but I'm afraid I don't know if tubers are even a part of your diet. And I don't particularly feel like eating mice, despite how delicious you insist it is." Her nose wrinkled at the memory of the first meals her friends had tried to bring her. "Though I would appreciate it if next time you could bring something green? Only if you can find it without trouble, of course. I don't want you making nuisances of yourselves on my account."

Who gently butted Holly's ear with her downy soft head and hooted softly. Holly leaned into the fowl's affection and smiled. "I know you don't mind, clever thing. But *I* mind. Things are hard enough in Weihnacht as it is. The people don't need any extra mischief."

She rinsed her bowl and cup and laid them out on the counter to dry before wiping her hands down the front of her nightgown. Once upon a time it had been a beautiful, rich blue color; now it had faded to an icy blue that was almost gray.

But it was still warm, though, and that is what mattered the most—especially when winter seemed to come earlier and stay longer with every passing year.

Holly glanced out the open window, noting with some relief that an hour had already passed. She patted the folded piece of paper in her pocket; it would help pass the remaining time.

"Alright, my lovelies, this session of Parliament may now come to its conclusion." A slight giggle escaped her at the habitual, ridiculous send-off as she gave affectionate cuddles to What and Why. "I'll be here again at the same time tomorrow. Send Where, When, and How my love."

The two owls nipped at her with their beaks in sharp bird kisses and took off through the window to fly away soundlessly through the night. Holly looked up at Who.

"Will you stay with me until my letter is finished, or do you have some important owl business to attend to?"

The owl settled deeper onto her shoulder, burrowing back into the untamed tangle of dark curls that fell freely down Holly's back and chirping contentedly.

With the unique comfort that came from being able to feel another heartbeat besides her own in the overwhelming silence, Holly retraced her steps up the steep stairs, down the long halls, and into one of the two other rooms that she used regularly. It had once been a private sitting room in the royal family's quarters, and there was a tasteful arrangement of comfortable furniture arranged in a semi-circle around a large hearth. A massive mantel of carved oak made up the centerpiece of the room, with rosettes and climbing vines cut into the wood in intricate arrangements. Such care and detail had gone into the craftsmanship that Holly had believed as a young girl that fairy magic had simply transformed real roses into wood.

Faded, dusty stockings hung over the empty hearth, the sight of them bringing up memories of cold, wet snow and peals of laughter, of a red sled the same color as the holly berries outside the window, of the sight of bright eyes and pink cheeks and jolly voices.

No one had expected *that* would be the day that it all changed.

Holly forced her eyes to gloss over the mantel and the stockings with little more than an absent acknowledgment of their presence. She could dwell on the memories in her dreams later.

Instead, she focused her attention on the small writing desk in the corner that she had dragged into the space so many years ago and shoved against the wall under the tall, diamond-paned window. The wooden chair creaked as Holly sat down. Who hopped off her shoulder, climbing onto the windowsill and immediately starting to preen her feathers.

The scraping sound of the tiny drawer opening echoed loudly throughout the room. Holly reached in and pulled out a stack of papers, creased and bent with fold lines and softened from reverent handling. As she had so many times before, Holly placed her candle to the side and started from the first letter, reading the words in their familiar, looping script.

I find it difficult to compose a proper greeting to an unknown recipient who leaves letters tucked away in the hollow of a tree. Yours was addressed 'To anyone who finds this,' which, I suppose, must make the reciprocal 'To the person who left the first letter' perfectly acceptable.

To answer your question, yes, I do celebrate the Winter Festival with my family. Everyone in Weihnacht does, though it does seem to be much less thrilling now than when I was younger. It's hard to be excited about winter when it's like an impolite guest who always overstays his welcome. I gather from your question that you must be a visitor or recent transplant to our (very cold) country. Do you celebrate the Winter Festival where you're from?

Since I have no idea when your letter was left in the tree, I am not very confident that this note will ever be seen by another pair of human eyes. Still, in the spirit of curiosity, I will be back again in a week's time.

Nic



Joy,

I must admit that I was pleasantly surprised to find your answer. Just tell me one thing: does the owl stare you down while you approach as well? No matter which direction I come from, its eyes are always on me. It's rather unnerving.

I am sorry to hear about your illness. Being confined to bed is terribly frustrating, and I hope you recover soon. While I did say the Winter Festival is not nearly as exciting as when I was younger, Deus Natus Day is still one of my favorite holidays, and it would be a shame if you had to miss it.

Nic



Joy,

Now that I am thinking of it, how exactly are you getting your letters to the tree if you haven't been able to leave your home? Unless, of course, you are really a wood sprite or some other fairy and make your home amongst the branches. If that is the case, is the owl your butler? Or guard? Is that why it continues to stare at me?

*(I hope you understand that I don't **really** think you are some kind of fairy creature. I am very cognizant of the fact that there is likely a friend or some other third party involved who carries the letter for you. My father is always reprimanding me for being much too ridiculous; he believes that a "real" man is much too serious to have an imagination.)*

But you asked about Deus Natus Day, not my father's opinions. Our family celebrates like most—we attend chapel at midnight the night before. I think my favorite part is when, after the last song, all of the lights are put out and we walk home by candlelight. Even the streetlamps are unlit. Though I am growing weary of the seemingly endless snow, there is something almost magical about the way the moonlight causes the ground to sparkle.

The next morning, we sleep late and attend another chapel service. Then it's home for a hot lunch of ham, buttered rolls, roasted vegetables, and an assortment of cookies and pastries. (I can smell them baking in the kitchen now.) We exchange gifts—my mother and father and two younger sisters and I—and then the rest of the day is spent together in whatever fashion we choose.

What about you? What kinds of traditions does your family keep this time of year?

Nic



Holly smiled softly as she pictured the domestic scene that Nic's words conjured in her mind. She could practically taste the Deus Natus treats, and her own memories of celebrations melded with his descriptions, until she nearly wasn't sure which were her own and which were contrived. She stroked a loving finger over the familiar words as she moved the letter aside to read the next one.

Joy,

I had nearly forgotten about sledding! It's been so long since my siblings and I were young enough for such frivolity that I hardly remember the feeling of flying down a snowy hill. I'm sure we still have a sled around here somewhere... Perhaps I'll get it out again.

It's quite an interesting question, to be worried about the economic state of the country. Are you sure you're not some foreign spy trying to puzzle out our weaknesses?

I'm joking again, of course. No one with ill intentions would be able to get past that owl and its soul-searching gaze.

To be honest, Weihnacht is struggling. There's no reason to sugarcoat it. The winters have been stretching on for longer and longer every year, and the growing season has in turn become shorter. It's been years since the farmers have been able to harvest more than a meager crop of winter wheat, and the warmer months are gone so quickly there's hardly time for any spring or summer crops. Resources

among the lower classes are scarce, spirits are low, and crime is on the rise. Just the other day a man was brought before the duke for breaking into his neighbor's cellar and stealing three bushels of pickles.

*Pickles, Joy. He was reduced to stealing **pickles**.*

The priest claims that one day God will send us a ruler again and bring back spring. But Weihnacht lost their royal family almost a century ago, and unless the ghosts in the castle come back to life, I'm not sure how exactly he expects that to happen. In the meantime, we are getting by. There is talk of forming an alliance with our neighbors to the south. The duke, whose position, as you know, has taken on a regent status, is hopeful that Ernteland would be amenable to adopting Weihnacht as a vassal state, thus allowing us to keep at least some of our autonomy. His daughter, as the sacrificial offering to be made in the marriage alliance, is not nearly as hopeful. In fact, she is vehemently opposed to the idea.

On that cheery note, I must close this off. Feel free to share any fresh ideas you might have about improving the lives of the Weihnish citizens. Perhaps all that time cooped up in your bed has given you lots of creative solutions.

Nic

A grin stretched across Holly's face. When Nic had written that letter, he had no idea just what he was getting into. She wished she could have seen his face as he read her reply. Did his eyes widen with as much surprise as his next letter communicated? His words conveyed amazement and awe—did he laugh and shake his head as he read? Did he share her ideas with as much enthusiasm as he claimed?

Holly's mouth silently formed the words as she read. This particular letter she knew almost by heart, so often had it been read, as it was the first time she could remember since *that* night that she had something truly helpful to offer.

Joy,

Beautiful, brilliant, blessed Joy,

I had not meant anything more in my request than a half-hearted joke. I certainly did not intend for you to take my words seriously. Imagine my surprise, then, when I arrive at the tree (the owl seems to have accepted that I am not a real threat by this point) and find not only a veritable tome's worth of letter but also some literal tomes detailing greenhouse construction and use and tuber farming. I was surprised and confused at first, but now that I've had a chance to read both your letter and the books, I have one thing to say:

You are brilliant.

I don't know why we haven't thought of doing this before, other than, of course, the fact that the duke clings very tightly to tradition and holds historic customs and practices as the metric by which every decision must be measured. But what worked for Weihnacht a hundred years ago when we still had four distinct seasons is very obviously not going to work now, and if we want our citizens to live through the next hundred years, something has to change.

*Obviously, without the duke's support I am unable to affect things on a wide scale, but I hope that once a few people have caught on to the genius of your idea, more will follow. I have a few friends in other cities who would doubtless be more than happy to try **anything** that will give them the hope of being able to provide enough food for their families.*

With regards to your other line of questioning, it is true that those families in the upper classes have fared slightly better in all of this. Wealth is not a solution against hunger forever, but it does seem to be a short-term defense. The duke's family, for example, has not suffered nearly as acutely as some other Weihnish have.

You may wonder why more has not been done to help the common folk, but if you have spent any amount of time in Weihnacht, you will doubtless have seen that Weihnish are proud people and balk at the idea of charity. Honestly, I wish that there were a way that I could just help them without knowing where the gifts came from.

Perhaps you have a solution to that idea as well? While you're at it, if you could please provide some more information on how you think the greenhouses would best be used. Do you think a communal structure would be more beneficial, or smaller ones intended for just one or two families to look after?

I am still giving thanks for your beautiful mind. You are truly an answer to prayer.
Nic

Holly's attention was pulled from the letter by the sound of rustling feathers. Who spread her wings and flapped anxiously, and Holly looked up, noting the position of the moon. She didn't have much time left. Setting the pile of letters aside—she would re-read the rest while waiting for her next answer—she carefully unfolded her new letter and smoothed it out flat on the desk before holding it up to the dim light of the candle flame.

Dear Joy,

Your encouraging words, as always, were just what I needed, and they have made me bold enough to finally ask:

Will you meet me?

The owl tree, this Deus Natus Eve?

I find that knowing you on paper is no longer enough. I want to see your face, to see the way your eyes light up when you speak of your family, to watch you tackle the challenges that face our little country with the most amazing mixture of creativity and intelligence I have ever seen. I want to be able to hear your voice, to know if it matches what I hear in my own mind when I read your words. There are things I want to tell you—things that should only be said in person, not in ink.

Will you come?

Nic

Holly's eyes widened and her jaw dropped, along with the paper she was holding. She let out a strangled exclamation of surprise. Her owl companion gave a concerned hoot in response and Holly looked up into the glowing amber eyes.

"He wants to meet me."

"Who?"

"Nic—you know, my correspondent. I suppose it shouldn't be much of a surprise; we've exchanged letters every week for a year now. It was only a matter of time before he got curious. But what am I supposed to say to him?"

"Who?"

Holly sighed and leaned forward on the desk. She rested her chin on one hand and reached out the other to absently pet the soft feathers on the top of Who's head. "To Nic, silly. Do keep up."

The owl gave a perturbed chirp.

"I know, I know. There really is only one answer that I can give him, which is 'no.' But then he's going to start asking all kinds of questions that I don't know how to answer." She sighed again and looked out the window. "It's too late now, though. I'll have to save his answer for another day. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting."

Who hopped forward and rubbed her head along Holly's chin.

"I love you, too. Now let's go open that window before you end up stuck in here all night."

Holly carefully stacked the old letters from Nic and replaced them in the desk drawer, slipping the latest into her pocket. It was a rather melancholy walk back to the kitchen, where she opened the window and bade farewell to Who, and then a long, lonely trek back up the stairs and to the study. She had developed a strong fondness for Nic, her unseen correspondent, and liked to think that he felt at least some of the same connection with her. Their more than a hundred letters had covered a wide variety of topics, from their shared fear of never being able to live up to parental expectations to the amusing anecdotes he would often share about his dogs or his spunky older sister. And while Holly felt flattered that Nic cared about her enough to want to meet in person, she couldn't help but wish that he would be content with just keeping their relationship as it had been.

She didn't want to lose him, but after he learned the truth about everything surrounding *that* night, she didn't see how anything else would be possible.

Holding her candle high, Holly passed the door to the little sitting room and continued down the hall towards the corner of the castle where the tallest tower rose above the rest of the building. Her eyelids and movement began to grow heavy.

Her path took her through another sitting room. Holly hesitated at the door, steeling herself for what was on the inside. "Just look straight ahead," she whispered to herself. "Look straight ahead. They're just sleeping."

With a last deep breath that threatened to turn into a yawn, she pushed open the door and stepped into the dark room. The flickering circle of candlelight wasn't much, but it was enough to see the still, shadowy forms lying eerily on the floor, draped over couches, and leaning heavily to the side as they hunched over in chairs. Holly kept her eyes focused straight ahead as she walked with quick, determined steps.

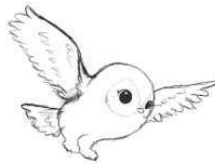
Even though the slow rise and fall of their chests indicated sleep, it was hard not to be spooked by a room that appeared to be full of corpses.

The door to the stairs was on the other side of the room, and by the time Holly climbed the four flights, she was almost thankful for the unseen force that seemed to be dragging her back to her bed. She blew out the candle with a quick puff, then laid down on the bed and pulled the covers up to her chin. She had pushed herself to the very limit that night, and her eyes closed immediately.

And, just as she had done every night for the last ninety-nine years, eleven months, and thirteen days, Holly fell into a deep, cursed sleep.

Chapter Two

*The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there;*



The darkness was Dominic's friend. Clad in dark blue wool from head to toe with a stocking cap pulled low over his head to hide his straw-blond hair, he stooped low to the ground as he snuck around the base of the house. He checked each window as he passed, searching for one he could open without causing too much noise.

With a silent growl of frustration, he pushed against the weathered wood of the last window frame. Like all the others, it remained stubbornly in place.

Of course Mrs. Hubbard would have nailed all the windows shut—those triplets of hers probably get into all kinds of mischief.

Dominic dropped the canvas bag that had been slung over his shoulder and rubbed a hand over the back of his neck as he exhaled slowly and considered his options.

Forcing the windows would be too loud, and I don't want to risk breaking the glass. I could always leave the bag by the front door, but there's no guarantee someone else won't come by and take it before Mrs. Hubbard finds it in the morning. I could knock and run, I suppose, but that would wake her up and with a new baby she's already losing enough sleep as it is.

At the thought, Dominic cocked an ear toward the house, straining his ears for any sounds of crying. He had watched the light from Mrs. Hubbard's candle go out just over an hour ago, which meant he only had another hour or two at most before the newborn was awake and screaming again.

A noise out on the street startled him into motion, and he sank into the shadows at the back of the house. Three men, arms thrown over one another's shoulders, stumbled down the street from the direction of the closest tavern. The one on the left swayed as he walked, pulling his friends with him towards the ground before they managed to right him. They were singing an old drinking song together, their words slurred together and voices out of tune.

"Bring 'round the barrel and fill us a cup.

We'll drink til we've fallen, and then get back up.

*We'd drink to the king's health—a right hearty toast!
Or at least it would be, if he wasn't a ghost!"*

The barely discernible words continued as the trio slogged their way down the street. Dominic let out a sigh of relief as they disappeared from sight and cast his eyes up and down the dark road to make sure that no one else had come out to investigate the disturbance. He breathed in the crisp winter air, cold enough now to sting the inside of his nose. The night was silent once again.

Back to the problem at hand...I guess it will have to be knock-and-run this time. Dominic pressed his lips together in displeasure. *I'll just make sure to time it so that it happens right after the baby wakes up again anyway.*

With a plan of action now decided, he leaned against the wall of the house to wait. There was a beauty in the stillness of the night that he loved. When the town was asleep and the soft moonlight sparkled on the snow-covered ground, he could almost imagine that it was just a normal winter night. He could pretend that the citizens of Weihnacht weren't slowly starving as the frigid temperatures and icy weather held on longer and longer every year. He could ignore the fact that the king had been gone for nearly a century, and the current duke was acting as regent—as his father and grandfather had before him—trying to hold the country together in the face of greedy neighbors who were poised and ready to take advantage of his tenuous hold on power the moment they could. He could dream that his own meager efforts actually were worthwhile, and not simply a tiny bandage over a wound that was slowly bleeding out.

But the greenhouses have made some difference, even if kale and brussel sprouts are not the most appealing of foods. And the first potato crops were promising, if we can only manage to make it through the winter again to plant another.

His eyes wandered lazily over the dark silhouettes of the buildings and roofs to the starry sky above. It was a rare night that the tiny, glittering diamonds of light weren't obscured by heavy clouds, and Dominic drank in the sight. The wind changed direction, carrying the sharp scent of burning wood. He could just barely make out the smoke from the chimney in the house across the street.

The chimney.

Dominic's mind jumped into action. Like most homes in Rodel, the capital of Weihnacht, Mrs. Hubbard's dwelling boasted at least two fireplaces—one in the kitchen for cooking and another in the great room. He knew, from his days of research, that Mrs. Hubbard generally only lit the fire in the kitchen to conserve wood, which meant that the second fireplace would be cold from disuse. There would be no risk of burning himself on banked coals.

He looked down, assessing and gauging his form. Dominic had always been on the small side, and though he had finally achieved an average height, his form was still slender. His muscles were lithe rather than bulky, and, much to his sister's chagrin, he could boast of a waist smaller than hers. If he kept his arms above his head, there was a chance he just might fit.

Without waiting to consider it any further, Dominic grabbed the ties of his canvas bag and looped them over his shoulders so that it hung down his back. He used the windowsill to give himself a boost, then quickly scrambled his way to the roof, taking advantage of the rough stone walls to find hand and footholds. Once on the roof, he stepped as lightly as he could to the chimney that led down to the great room.

The interior was slightly narrower than he had anticipated—a dark rectangle ten inches deep and about a foot and a half wide. Dominic frowned as he slipped the bag from his shoulders.

There's no way I'll be able to wear it on my back on the way down but pulling it down after me will only result in a bruised face. I don't want to drop it down, or things might break.

After another moment's thought, he sat down on the narrow edge of the chimney and tied the strings over his scuffed boots, and then swung his legs over so that the bag hung down into the hole. The sound of the contents rattling as it bumped against the sides of the chimney was amplified in the narrow space, and Dominic froze, holding his breath while he listened for any sign of movement below.

A long, stressful minute passed before he was satisfied that the inhabitants of the house below were still fast asleep. With a deep breath, he slowly eased himself over the edge and down the chimney, bracing himself against the sides with his feet and hands to slow his descent.

The chimney widened as he approached the bottom, much to his relief. He kicked his foot out to get the bag out of the way then dropped the last few feet into the hearth, landing in a crouch amongst the dusty coals. A cloud of black dust swirled around him, and Dominic coughed into his shoulder to muffle the sound.

He untied the bag and made quick work of setting out its contents. There was a small ham, a sack of red potatoes, a loaf of hearty bread, and a small package of molasses cookies wrapped in brown paper and tied with a red ribbon. These he arranged on a narrow table on one side of the room.

The rest of the bag was full of wooden toys—a few puzzles, a set of jacks, a baby rattle, and a small squad of wooden soldiers. In addition to her triplet boys, Mrs. Hubbard had taken in four other children whose parents were absent either by death or incarceration. The newest of these was the newborn in the next room. Being a widow herself, the kind woman had limited options in supporting herself and her charges, and when Dominic had heard through the grapevine that her cupboards were all but bare, he knew he needed to do something.

His last act was to tiptoe across the room to the front door, where varying sizes of shoes were lined up neatly in a row. He placed a copper coin in each of the children's shoes and two gold coins in Mrs. Hubbards. A satisfied grin spread across his face as he pictured their surprised reactions in the morning.

Satisfied with his work, Dominic rolled the empty canvas bag and shoved it into the pocket of his coat. He eyed the chimney dubiously. Coming down had been relatively easy, but he was certain it would be much more challenging to climb back up. He hesitated.

The simplest solution would be to just go out through the window or front door, but that would mean leaving either of them unlocked for the rest of the night. Dominic pressed his lips together in a frown, recalling the drunk men he had seen stumbling down the street earlier. I don't want to leave Mrs. Hubbard in a vulnerable position. I'll give it a try.

His fears were right; it was indeed a more difficult endeavor to shimmy his way up the narrow chimney. By the time he made it to the top, the bottom of his cap was damp with sweat from his forehead and his arms and legs ached from the effort of bracing himself as he climbed. He sat on the shingled roof for a moment and leaned his back against the chimney, catching his breath and appreciating the cold air against his hot skin. The muffled cry of a baby broke the silence of the night.

Dominic waited until the house was quiet once more before lowering himself from the edge of the roof and dropping down to the frozen ground. He retraced his steps from earlier that night, ducking down an alleyway that dead-ended at a stone wall. As he approached the wall, eight furry, wolf-like forms rose from the ground. Furry tails wagged furiously in a silent greeting as cold, wet noses sniffed at his

legs and hands. The dogs looked up at him with bright, adoring eyes, and it was only their adherence to strict training that kept them from whining and barking in welcome. A wooden sled with a long rope attached to empty leather harnesses waited behind them.

Dominic grinned at them and scratched behind each of their ears, enjoying the warmth of their soft fur on his cold hands. "I'm back, pups," he announced quietly. "Ready for another ride?"

At his words, the dogs all bounded over to where their harnesses had been left on the alley floor, forming themselves into two straight rows on either side of the leather straps. Dominic worked quickly, buckling the harnesses over their long, thick fur. He murmured words of praise to each one as he worked.

"Good boy, Blitz. Well done, Donnie. Vivian, thank you for standing like a lady. Way to show these boys how it's done."

He threaded the last harness strap through its buckle. "All right, Dash, one more stop to make and then we can go home." Dominic gave the older dog a scratch underneath his soft gray and white muzzle. Dash whined softly and leaned into his hand as his tail thumped against packed snow.

After one last pet, Dominic took up his position at the rear of the sled, standing on the two long skis that extended behind the main body. He pulled the canvas sack from his pocket and tossed it into the sled in front of him. He whistled once, sharply, and the dogs' ears immediately perked up. As he called their names in a whispered shout, each dog shifted into a ready stance.

"Now, Dash! Now, Dancer! Now, Prince! Now, Vivian! On, Comet! On, Cupid! On, Donnie! On, Blitz! Dash away, all!"

At his last command, the dogs leaped into action. The sled lurched forward so suddenly that Dominic would have lost his footing had he not been expecting it. The dogs were silent, save for the slight jingle of their harnesses, as they ran down the side streets and alleyways. Dominic guided them to the northern edge of town, where the landscape opened up before him.

Once upon a time, this part of Rodel had been a public park that separated the castle from the rest of the town. Overgrown paths meandered through tall trees, leading to a central fountain. Dominic was sure that in its day it had been beautiful and impressive, but now it was little more than a large, empty stone basin with weeds growing up between cracks. Stone statues stood here and there among the shrubbery, just as overgrown and uncared for as the rest of the area. On the far side of the park was an iron fence almost completely obscured by climbing ivy and thick holly hedges. Looming above was the dark silhouette of the castle walls, with tall towers in each corner that stood like silent sentinels.

The park was generally empty, as most Weihnish citizens were wary of the stories of ghosts that resided in the abandoned castle, but every so often a few adventurous and foolish boys would come in and wreak some havoc on the trees, or else draw mustaches and ridiculous faces on the statues.

Dominic and his dogs were the only visitors to the park that night. Dash and Dancer followed his commands, weaving their way through the park and coming quickly to a particularly tall juniper tree that stood, old and hale, near the fence. Dominic called for the dogs to halt and hopped off the sled, approaching the tree carefully and scanning its branches for the familiar spot of white.

He found it and looked quickly away when the amber eyes pierced him with their gaze. He held up his hands. "Good evening, friend," he said in a soft, comforting voice. "I'm just here to check the tree and then I'll be on my way."

Even after a year, the owl still unnerved him. Somehow it seemed to be just a little *too* aware of him, as if it knew things about him that a bird had no business knowing.

It watched him with unblinking eyes but made no move to fly away as he approached. Dominic kept his eyes averted as he reached up and felt around the small knothole where he had placed his letter the night before.

It was empty.

Dominic was disappointed but not surprised. It sometimes took Joy a few days before she was able to return his letters.

But it wouldn't take that long to pen a response. Just a line would suffice. "Yes, I'll be there." Or, "No, I can't come."

He brought his hands up to his mouth and blew over his cold fingers, trying to warm them up. There was a wet bite to the air that promised snow would be on the ground before morning, despite the clearness of the night.

Dominic glanced up at the owl. "Do you think I've scared her off?" he whispered.

The bird shifted on the branch and bobbed its head. "Who?"

"Joy, of course. Who else leaves letters in this tree?" A sudden thought struck him, and he smacked his forehead with the heel of his hand. "Oh, fractals. She probably doesn't."

Joy had alluded in her letters to being confined to her bed a majority of the time. She apparently had been quite ill, and now that he thought about it, he was fairly certain that she rarely—if at all—delivered her letters in person.

He looked up ruefully at the owl, who strangely seemed more than content to watch with its head tilted slightly as Dominic spoke. "You wouldn't be able to tell me if there's a young lady who puts the letters here in the tree, would you?"

A ruffling of feathers and a hard stare was his only answer. Dominic sighed.

I'll just have to be patient. And if she's unable to leave her home, perhaps she would be willing to meet me there.

With that thought to buoy his spirits, Dominic returned to his waiting team. It was a long ride back home, taking the country roads on the outskirts of town, but the dogs were eager for the exercise. The clouds started rolling in, and fluffy flakes of snow were drifting down by the time he called the team to a halt in front of a large barn. A soft glow of light shone around the edges of the wide wooden doors, evidence that the head groom was still awake.

Dominic climbed off the sled, stomping his cold feet on the ground to try to regain some feeling in his toes. He started freeing the dogs from their harnesses, fumbling over the buckles with stiff, frozen fingers. Wagging tails and lolling tongues followed him as he gathered the leather straps into a loose pile in his arms and dragged the sled over the ground to the barn door.

Before he could free a hand to open it, the wooden door slid open, scraping over the dirt and hay on the floor inside and flooding the ground in front of him with a warm yellow light. The stable hand, his friend Myran, stood in the open doorway with his arms crossed over his broad chest. He shook his head like a mother scolding a wayward child. His brown hair flopped into his eyes.

"You're out late, Nic." Myran reached out a beefy hand and picked up the sled like it weighed nothing.

"Could say the same about you," Dominic retorted. The dogs ambled past him, trotting up the wide aisle between the stalls, nosing along the ground as if to reassure themselves that nothing interesting had passed that way while they were out.

He followed as the groom kicked the door closed and carried the vehicle to a corner of the warm building and set the sled down in its place between a wide-wheeled wagon and the wall. Myran wiggled his fingers at the pile of leather in Dominic's arms.

Dominic rolled his eyes. "I'm perfectly capable of cleaning up after myself, Ron."

"You are. But I'm closer to the pegs, and this way you won't have to stand on the wagon to reach the ones at the top." Myran's dark eyes twinkled with mischievous pleasure. He was a full head taller than Dominic and at least twice as wide, with sturdy muscles made strong by a life of manual labor.

"Just because Deus saw fit to make you a giant," Dominic grumbled, but he handed over the harnesses. Myran hung them one by one on the pegs in the wall, taking care to keep the straps from twisting. He was right, of course; Dominic would have had to stand on the edge of the wagon or else pull over an empty barrel in order to reach the top pegs.

He flexed his hands at his sides. His fingers were slowly thawing in the barn's warmth, creating a tingling sensation that felt like hundreds of tiny needles were being pressed into his skin.

"What happened to your gloves?" Myran was still facing the wall, but somehow he had not missed the small movement. "Did you lose them?"

"Something like that."

The groom hung the last harness and turned around, dusting his hands off on his pant legs. He tilted his head in a pointed look. "You gave them away again, didn't you?"

Dominic shrugged. "Georgie needed them more than I do."

"You spend nearly every night out doing your...*errands*. You need a pair of gloves."

"Yes, mother."

"You know I'm just looking out for you. I know you would give away the coat off your back if you thought someone needed it..." Myran's voice trailed off as he narrowed his eyes, looking at Dominic's coat with scrutiny. "That's your old jacket; the one that Ma had to sew back together after you got into a scuffle with that fellow at the inn."

Dominic raised his eyebrows. "I didn't realize you kept such close tabs on my wardrobe."

"I remember that one." Myran crossed his arms. "Ma scolded me for days about how I should be keeping a better eye on you."

"I can take care of myself." He mimicked his friend's stance. "That fellow was harassing Brigid and needed to be stopped."

"He was twice your size."

"I still won, didn't I?"

Myran shook his head wryly, a fond smile pulling at the edges of his mouth. "You did, but at the expense of both your face and your coat. Speaking of which, what happened to the new one? You know your mother is going to have a fit if she knows you've been gallivanting about town in a raggedy old coat."

Dominic shrugged. "I happen to like this one."

"It's faded and patched. The craftsmanship is shoddy everywhere except for where Ma sewed it up."

"It holds a lot of memories."

"You gave away all the others, didn't you?" Myran raised an eyebrow. "It's the last one you have left, and the only one you *won't* give away because you know that

it's hardly worthy of being called a coat anymore."

"Why does it matter so much to you?" Dominic jutted his chin out in a show of stubborn defiance. "After all, what I do with my things is my own business."

Myran sighed and dropped his arms. "You know that I support you, Nic. I think it's a kind and generous thing that you're doing—though I still think it would be better to do it during the daylight. But you can't take care of every person in Weihnacht, or even Rodel, and you certainly will be of no use to them if you don't also take care of yourself."

"And I am. I'm still wearing a coat, after all. As for the gloves, I'll find another pair. In the meantime, do you have any more toys for me?"

Myran's father, Patrick, was a cabinet maker by trade, and during the long winter evenings he and Myran had begun carving wooden toys from the scraps of wood leftover in his shop as a way to pass the time. Their creations were intricate and whimsical, but Patrick refused to sell any of them in his shop. Instead, he and Myran were more than happy to give them to Dominic to distribute on his "errands" around town.

A long-suffering sigh escaped his friend. "Come by tomorrow. We'll have another dozen or so ready."

"Excellent." Dominic grinned and slapped Myran's arm affectionately as he stepped around him.

"Did she answer you yet?"

Myran's question stopped him in his tracks, and his grin immediately fell flat. He turned slowly, trying to appear unaffected. "Not yet. But it often takes a few days between letters."

"You're worried she won't want to see you."

There were times when having a best friend who knew him as well as Myran did was quite inconvenient. Dominic shrugged. "She's been sick for a while. She might not be physically able to meet."

The large man gave him a knowing look. "A convenient excuse. She's able to get her letters out."

A long breath escaped him. "What do you want me to say, Ron? Yes, I'm worried that I came on too strong and frightened her away. After all, we've only ever communicated through letters. What if introducing the idea of meeting in person is too much? Worse, what if she does agree and then is disappointed when she finds out that I'm just...me?"

Myran's brows drew together in a troubled frown. "What do you mean?"

"Come on, man. You have to know that I'm not exactly a woman's ideal specimen."

"I wouldn't know anything about it," Myran returned drily.

Dominic gestured widely up and down the length of his torso. "I'm small. Short. I've been the same size since I was fourteen."

"And?"

"And most women are looking for a man who at the very least has broader shoulders than they do. They want a tall, manly man with big muscles, not a grown man with the physique of an adolescent boy. They want someone like *you*, Ron."

"I'm not sure whether to be flattered or disturbed."

Dominic's eyes rolled as he groaned in frustration. "The point is, what if Joy is disappointed?"

Myran was silent for a moment, his lips pressed together in thought. "I'm only going to say this once," he finally said, spearing Dominic with his bright, intense eyes, "so you better listen closely. You are more than your physical stature, Dominic

Klause. You have a brilliant mind, a serving spirit, and a heart that is bigger than anyone else I've ever met. You also have an annoyingly chipper and jolly attitude most of the time, but that is beside the point. What *is* the point is that any woman worth having is going to recognize all these things about you, and your height—or lack thereof—is all a moot point. If this Joy has learned anything about your heart and mind through your letters, she's going to understand that. She will recognize that you are a man worth knowing."

Dominic blinked, speechless for a moment at the uncharacteristic praise. His throat burned with emotion, and he cleared his throat. "Why Ron, I'm touched. I didn't realize you felt that way about me," he joked in an effort to hide his feelings.

Myran gave him a flat look. "Don't get used to it. Like I said, you're never going to hear it again."

He clasped his hands dramatically to his chest. "But I have heard it once, and the words are forever emblazoned in the memory of my heart."

"I take it back. You are utterly ridiculous, and she will probably dismiss you on the spot." The words were harsh, but there was a slight quivering of Myran's chin, a sign that he was trying to hold in his laughter.

Dominic grinned. "Come now, you know my humor is my best feature, second only to my chimney-climbing skills."

Myran's eyebrows shot up. "I was wondering why your face is covered in soot, but I thought it safest not to ask. The chimney, huh?"

"The doors were locked, and the windows nailed shut. I'm assuming Mrs. Hubbard has had one too many escape attempts by the Triplet Terrors. It was the only way in without breaking glass or rousing the entire household."

Myran's head had tilted to the side as Dominic spoke, and he blinked suddenly, as if clearing his thoughts. "I'm sorry. I'm still just trying to wrap my mind around the fact that you *fit down a chimney*."

Dominic stuck out his tongue and started walking again, whistling once for Dash. The large dog bounded over with enthusiastic obedience. "Yes, well, we can't all be built like mountains."

"I didn't say it was bad. To be honest, I'm slightly terrified. I'll have to warn Ma to block her chimneys the next time she bakes a batch of molasses cookies, or you might come in and steal them."

Dash leaned heavily against his leg, and Dominic sank his fingers into the soft, thick fur on the dog's neck and scratched. "Ha. You know that she would probably leave them out with a glass of milk if she thought there was a chance I'd stop by. Your mother loves me."

"She does—probably more than she loves any of her own children. But you've had a way of endearing yourself to people ever since we were kids. No one could say no to that tiny face and those big blue eyes." Myran ushered them towards the barn door and reached up to grab the lantern from where it hung on a hook high on the wall. "Now it's the fact that you go around leaving them food and gifts in the middle of the night."

"But they don't know about that," Dominic said quickly as they both stepped out into the freezing air. The snow was falling thickly now, blanketing the ground in a soft layer of white. "Because you haven't said anything, right?"

"You know the duke is going to find out eventually." Myran pulled the barn door closed with a heave. "Especially when you show up in the wee hours of the morning with soot all over your face. He's a reasonable man, I doubt he would object to you taking care of the townsfolk—well, except for the breaking and entering part."

Dominic shoved his hands into his pockets, shielding his bare fingers from the biting wind. “He’s not the one I’m worried about. You know how the townspeople are—they’re so stubborn that they would return the food and gifts if they knew who it came from.”

“Some of them. Others would gladly knock you down, take it, sell it for the highest offer, and go spend the night in the tavern.”

“Exactly.” A tired sigh escaped him, and Dominic’s shoulders fell. “How did we get here, Ron?”

“The sudden loss of a strong monarchy followed by a century of self-rule,” his friend answered simply. The lantern light cast shadows across Myran’s face, making it hard to discern his expression. “And a harsh climate and unforgiving conditions that make eking out even a basic living incredibly difficult. People have either spent so many years with their noses to the ground that it’s become a point of pride to not need any outside help, or else they’ve given up completely and resorted to theft and violence to get what they need.”

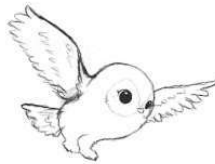
Dominic blew out a slow breath and let his head fall back, looking up into the flurry of falling snowflakes. “Hence the—what did you call it? —breaking and entering.”

“I still think you need to tell the duke before he finds out from someone or something else.”

“He’s going to find out tomorrow.” He looked back down, scuffing his boot through the snow on the ground and revealing the muddy ground. “I’m running out of resources. Even if he doesn’t agree to give me additional funds or support, I have to try.” Dominic’s eyes drifted in the darkness back in the direction of the castle. “Something needs to change.”

Chapter Three

*The children were nestled all snug in their beds,
While visions of sugar plums danced in their heads.*



Holly blinked as the dark shadows in her room slowly came into focus. She gazed up at the ceiling above her, barely visible in the cold moonlight, and allowed just a moment for wondering longingly what it would be like to wake up to sunshine again. Her whispered voice pierced the stillness of the room. “Thirty-six thousand, five hundred and eight. I can’t even remember what the sun looks like.”

One small, hopeless tear escaped her eye and trailed down her cheek. Holly brushed it brusquely away and sat up, swinging her bare feet to the floor. She felt around in the dim light for the slippers beside her bed. “Well. There’s no use in moping about what circumstances I can’t change. Besides, it’s wash day—I mean night. If I don’t get started now, there won’t be enough time to get things dry before bed.”

Holly lit her candle and gathered the wash bowl, her towel, a spare nightgown, and the last remaining bar of soap in the castle. It was almost completely worn away by this point, a rounded rectangle no larger than her palm and about as thick as her thumbnail. She didn’t want to think about what would happen to the state of her hair and clothes when it finally ran out.

“I’ll have to learn the art of soap-making, I suppose,” she said out loud, though there was no one around to hear her. “I wonder if the library has any books on the subject. It’s extensive, but I’m not sure it’s *that* extensive.” Once her supplies were in hand, she made her way quickly past the sleeping bodies and down the long halls to the kitchen.

Who and What were already waiting at the window when she arrived, and they immediately took up a perch on the end of the long table in the center of the room. They hooted softly at her in greeting, blinking large amber eyes and ruffling feathers as they got themselves settled.

“Good evening, ladies,” Holly said pleasantly as she got to work starting a fire. “Where is the rest of Parliament?”

Her question was answered by the scraping of branches against glass and the rustling of leaves as four more owls made their way through the open window.

Three dropped their customary bundles of sticks onto the floor and a fourth, the only tawny one of the bunch, dropped a sprig of mistletoe into her hand.

Holly blinked at it in surprise, then laughed. "Thank you, How. I'm not sure that I'll ever have the chance to use this, but I appreciate the thought." She tucked the mistletoe into her pocket, brushing her fingers against Nic's letter as she did so. Her heart gave a small, painful lurch at the reminder, but she stoically shoved the emotion aside.

The small fire in the kitchen was soon crackling and snapping merrily. In a rare show of carelessness, Holly tossed all of her wood into the fire rather than rationing it carefully.

"I'm cold," she defended herself to the six pairs of blinking eyes. "And I'm tired of being cold."

Who responded by flying over from the table and landing on her shoulder. The owl gently rubbed her head against the side of Holly's face, cooing softly.

Hot tears sprang to life in her eyes and fell down her cheeks. She dashed them away, sinking down into the chair beside the table. A hooted chorus of concern filled the kitchen, and Holly suddenly found herself surrounded on all sides by feathers as her owls sat on her shoulders and combed their beaks through her hair or squeezed her arms gently with their taloned feet.

She let out a watery laugh at their antics. "I'm sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me."

Who jumped off her shoulder to face her on the table, cocking her head to the side and looking at her pointedly.

"Oh, all right. I do know. It's just...harder this year for some reason. Maybe it's because I thought that things would be back to normal by now—though, I suppose after a hundred years, who's to say that this *isn't* normal?" She gently extricated her arms from the flock of birds and resumed her task of setting water to boil. "Maybe this is just what the rest of my life will be: another seven hundred or so years of cold, lonely, silent nights."

Holly blinked furiously at the tears that once more threatened. She breathed deeply, then put on a brave smile. "Well. There's no use moping, is there?"

Who bobbed her head in agreement, and the rest of Parliament followed suit, punctuating their feelings with coos and whistles.

Buoyed by the support, Holly banished her tears and went through her routine, carrying on a steady, one-sided conversation with her feathered friends.

"I need your advice," she announced as she carefully poured some of the boiling water into her wash bowl. She tempered it with cold water from the barrel until it was cool enough to touch. "Nic wants to meet with me."

What let out a surprised hoot, and Why and Where fluttered their wings in consternation. Holly ran her fingers through her dark braid, untangling the long tresses before dunking her head into the bowl.

"I know. That was my reaction, as well." She lifted her dripping hair from the bowl and carefully held her head sideways as she reached to the side, fishing around for the bar of soap. Who picked it up with her feet and dropped it beside Holly's searching fingers.

"Thanks, Who." She began to gently lather the soap into her hair. "Anyways, I don't know how to answer him. How does one gently break the news that they are trapped inside a castle by an enchanted holly hedge?"

Why bobbed her little head and snapped her beak.

"I was planning on avoiding any mention of sleeping curses for the moment," Holly answered with a sigh. She set the soap aside and dipped her head into the

water again to rinse it off. "I have a feeling that sort of thing might scare him away, and it is nice to have a friend on the outside."

She wrapped her wet hair up in the towel and secured it around her head like a turban. "I'm not certain; things might have changed in the last hundred years. But I believe that most people do their best to stay as far away from curses as they can."

Hoots of protest filled the air.

"Yes, yes. I know that you're here, and I'm quite grateful for your company. But, my dears, you're not *people*." A few disgruntled hisses followed in response. "You're owls. Which, of course, means you have much more sense."

The birds appeared to be mollified at this. Holly moved as close to the fire as she could before quickly changing her nightgown. The white cotton was not nearly as warm as the blue-gray flannel and was much more suited to summer nights, but it would suffice for the short time she needed for washing and drying the other.

She replaced the water in the wash bowl and began scrubbing the fabric of her nightgown. Though she hardly engaged in strenuous activities that would result in dirty and soiled clothing, there was still enough dust that gathered during the hours that she was sleeping to warrant a weekly washing.

Not only that, but there was a normalcy in doing laundry that Holly craved—a small reminder that though her existence was a cursed one, there were still moments of mundane humanity.

"But you still haven't answered my question," she continued. "What am I supposed to tell him? I don't want Nic to think that I'm trying to avoid him, or that I don't value his correspondence, but there are only so many times that I can use my health as an excuse before he'll start to think that there is something wrong—if he doesn't already." Holly sighed as she twisted the garment over the bowl, wringing the water out. She draped it over the back of a second chair and pulled it as close to the fire as she dared without risking it catching on fire.

She sank to the floor beside the flames and pulled her legs in to rest her chin on her knees while she used a poker to languidly stoke the flames.

"It was all a foolish dream, wasn't it? I knew when I put that first letter out there that it would only lead to heartbreak. I suppose that's why I signed that second with my middle name—to try to keep a little bit of distance. But I've been alone for so long, and when he kept writing back it was like finally waking up after a long sleep. There was finally a reason to get out of bed, and to care again about the world outside of these walls. And Nic is...well, he's smart and funny and kind, and you can just tell from the way he writes that he cares so much about Weihnacht and all her people."

The owls had once again gathered around her. Who took up her customary position on Holly's shoulder, and Holly reached up and absentmindedly stroked the bird's feathers as she talked.

"I know it's silly to say, but it feels like there's a connection there. We've written over a hundred letters by now; I feel like I know him even better than I ever knew any of my childhood friends, even though we've never met."

How hopped over, tilting her head with a soft, questioning hoot and blinking solemn, intelligent amber eyes.

"I don't know, but I do care about him a great deal. But maybe it's better, then, that I don't meet him. What will he do when he finds out that I'm the reason for the state the kingdom is in right now?"

How's head shifted the other way. She snapped her beak curiously.

"Oh, that's right. You're the newest member of Parliament. Did the others not fill you in?"

Who cooed gently beside her ear.

"Well, settle in, then. It's a rather long tale." Holly shifted slightly, turning her body so that the fire warmed her other side. The spot in front of the hearth was cozy and snug, even if the rest of the castle was vacant and cold. Century-old memories filled her mind's eye, sweet as sugar plums and just as precious. If she closed her eyes, she could almost feel the icy snow and the biting wind as their sleds flew down the hill. She could still imagine the flurry of excitement brought on by Deus Natus Day, and the childlike wonder that accompanied the decorations and the gifts and the age-old traditions.

"It may come as a surprise to you, How, but winter in Weihnacht used to be much more magical than it is now, probably because the season lasted a reasonable length of time, rather than dragging on longer and longer every year.

"Everything changed nearly a century ago on Deus Natus Day. It was something of a tradition that after the morning service and a hearty breakfast, the entire town of Rodel would come together for a day of merrymaking. The park outside the castle gates has these glorious long hills on one side, just perfect for sledding, and the cooks in the kitchen would spend hours and hours baking cookies and mulling cider to hand out to the townspeople.

"As you know, my birthday happens to fall on Deus Natus, and though the festivities always felt extra special to me, it was the fact that it was my sixteenth birthday that made it even more exciting. There had been an incident with a jilted fairy when I was a baby—"

Why and What hooted loudly at this pronouncement.

"Well, Caryssa was angry because she hadn't been invited. What else would you call it? Anyway, my parents never said much about it—I had to learn the specifics myself from the record books in the library after everything happened—but she had been so put out that she cursed me to prick my finger and die before my sixteenth birthday."

How let out a shrill bark and snapped her beak.

"It's alright. There was another fairy there, and she was able to modify the curse so that instead of dying I would just sleep. I'm not entirely convinced some days that it was the more desirable option, but I suppose without it, I would never have known all of you."

Who cooed and rubbed her head affectionately against the side of Holly's head.

"The curse was modified so that I would sleep, but my parents, of course, still did everything they could to avoid anything that might set it off. They kept me away from needles and employed an absurd number of gardeners to ensure that none of the plants on the garden had thorns within reach of any of the paths. Even so, I had to wear long sleeves and gloves whenever I ventured outside in the spring or summer. It drew a lot of uncomfortable attention, in addition to being unbearably hot, and so I ended up spending most of my time indoors. The library became my favorite place, though if I ever wanted to take notes or write something down, I had to use a quill with a rounded tip or else a stick of dull charcoal. Even spindles were banned from the castle, although anyone who works with wool could tell you that spindles aren't actually sharp."

Holly's unfocused gaze rested on the dancing flames, and she let out a long exhale. "I'm sure it sounds like I'm complaining. I'm really not. I understand now why my parents were so protective, even if I didn't then. But it's why winter was my favorite season—all the layers and the padding weren't an uncomfortable nuisance, and they didn't make me stand out from all the other children. Anyways, this particular birthday was that much more exciting because I had made it to the

day without setting off the curse, and it really seemed like everything would be fine. I can't tell you how excited I was to *really* experience spring and summer for the first time.

"But, as you probably can guess, it didn't turn out that way. After spending most of the morning and early afternoon out in the snow, my sisters and I returned home to get out of our wet clothes and warm up. We hung our stockings up in front of the fire to dry (you have no idea how wonderful it is to put on warm, dry stockings on a cold evening) and went down to the kitchen in search of some more hot cider.

"On the way, I decided that I wanted to grab a different pair of slippers, and so I sent my sisters on ahead and went back up to my room. The castle was quiet that day, since we gave all the servants a holiday for Deus Natus, and I was surprised to hear someone singing. I followed the sound to one of the rarely-used sitting rooms up on the top floor, and found an old woman sitting in a rocking chair, singing and spinning wool with a drop spindle.

"I was mesmerized by the way the yarn wound around the spindle as it spun and slowly lowered to the ground. It was like magic. When she looked up and saw me there, the old woman started and dropped the spindle on the ground. It rolled towards me and, of course, I did the polite thing and bent down to pick it up for her."

All five of her snowy owls gave disapproving hoots, spreading their wings and flapping in agitation as they drew closer around her.

"Yes, well, it's quite clear now that the old woman was actually Caryssa, and she was not at all surprised by my presence but was rather planning on it. The tip of her spindle had been sharpened to a point. When I wrapped my hand around it to pick it up off the floor, it pricked the end of my finger.

"It happened slower than I expected. I had always thought it would be like falling asleep at the end of a long day—one moment you're putting your head on your pillow and then the next thing you know, you're waking up the next morning. Instead, it was like the world slowed down around me as I fell to the floor and the edges of my vision slowly started fading to black. The old woman's face changed, aging backwards until she was young and beautiful. She stood over me with a horrible, gloating expression, and do you know what she said?"

The owls waited in anticipatory silence.

"She said, 'Happy birthday, princess.'" Holly shook her head slowly. "As if sending me to my death were an appropriate way to celebrate the day of my birth. I can only assume that she had no idea the curse had been modified, or she might have actually killed me then and there. But those words were the last thing I heard before everything went black and I finally fell asleep."

Holly stretched her arms out in front of her, forcing Who to hop off as she rounded her shoulders to release some of the tension that had been building while she told her story. "Anyway, all of that is just to say that I'm the reason behind all of Weihnacht's troubles. If it weren't for my ill-timed curiosity, if I had just been content with my slippers and gone down to the kitchen, none of this would have happened." A hopeless sigh escaped her as she slowly rose to her feet. "But it did, and I have the feeling that neither Nic nor anyone else in the country would look at me the same way if they knew."

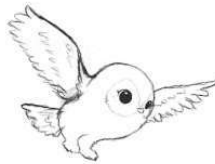
What hooted in protest and flew across the kitchen to the pantry door. He picked up a leaf of kale with his taloned foot and held it out.

"Yes, the greenhouses were my idea. But all it's doing is trying to fix something that I set into motion. It's too little, too late. The kingdom doesn't need kale, it needs a king. But until someone can wake us all up from this cursed sleep, I'm

afraid it will never be more than a dream and a Deus Natus wish.”

Chapter Four

*And mamma in her 'kerchief, and I in my cap,
Had just settled down for a long winter's nap.*



116 years earlier...

The shrill, piercing cry of a newborn baby rent the stillness of the silent winter night. A maid, carrying an armful of soiled linens, exited the queen's room a few moments later with an exhausted but happy smile.

"The queen has a daughter," she announced to the guard on duty at the end of the hall. "Our princess is here—a Deus Natus miracle!"

A few hours later the bells tolled, ringing in the new day as a crier ran through the streets, heralding the good news to the people in the capital city of Rodel. Their beloved king and queen had waited many long, heartbreaking years for this day, and all the citizens of Weihnacht with them.

"Their Majesties King Philip and Queen Briar are pleased to announce the birth of their daughter. In celebration of this special event, on this Deus Natus Day, every citizen in the town of Rodel is invited to a feast in honor of the new princess."

The crier made his way up and down the streets, his voice strong and joyful, with a wide smile on his face that was met by every person who threw open their shutters to hear the news. Cheers followed in his wake, and it was not long before an impromptu parade was formed behind him. Children dashed about, waving garlands in the air. A small choir of carolers gathered together, singing heartily despite the early morning chill. Bakers handed out cookies and warm pastries, and a few businessmen and merchants tossed coins out for the children as they passed. The town's dogs bounded amongst the crowd, adding their excited barks to the cacophony of joy.

The feast was long and bountiful, and not a single mouth went unfed. The people of Weihnacht stayed long into the night, toasting the happy parents and drinking to the health of the new baby. Spirits were merry and hearts were bright, and all thoughts were turned towards the bright future ahead of Weihnacht—a future held by a tiny babe cradled close in her mother's arms with her face peaceful in sleep.



“Are you sure you should be doing this?” King Philip hovered near his wife as if she were made of glass. His arms shot out to support her as she stood from the low rocking chair with their daughter in her arms.

Queen Briar looked up at him with an unamused expression. “I’m fine, Philip. I delivered a baby, not fought in a war.”

Philip flinched at the memory. “I’ve seen battle wounds with less blood,” he muttered, cupping a hand under her elbow.

“Women have been doing this since the beginning of the world. *I’m fine*. Stop hovering. You’re worse than a mother hen.” Briar shooed him away and adjusted her hold on the infant in her arms. The princess’s dark hair was just barely visible over the edge of the soft blanket. “It was three days ago. I would welcome an hour or two of standing at this point; I’m tired of being confined to this room.”

“Are you sure?”

“For the last time, *yes*. Here, take our daughter for a moment while I fix my dress. Smother her with your affection rather than me.” Though the words were harsh, there was a gentle teasing in Briar’s tone, and she reached up to brush a tender kiss to her husband’s cheek.

Philip took the baby from her and settled her into the crook of his arm. He was still in awe over her tiny rosebud mouth and perfect nose. Dark eyelashes were splayed over round cheeks, and a tiny fist had escaped the swaddled blanket to rest near her chin. “I’m sorry,” he apologized as his wife stepped in front of the mirror and fiddled with the lace collar of her evergreen dress. “I just have this overwhelming feeling that something is going to go wrong.”

Briar’s eyes met his in the glass. Their daughter had inherited their round shape and dark blue shade, though the physician had told him that the color might change as she grew. He hoped they didn’t.

“Everything is going to be alright. It’s a christening. We show up, formally announce her name, accept well-wishes, and leave. Did you send out all the invitations?” Briar turned her attention from her collar to her hair, and she pulled out the pins that were holding it loosely in place, sending the golden locks cascading down her back.

Philip pulled his eyes from the distracting sight and looked down at the precious sleeping face in his arms. “That’s what has me the most nervous. It’s been generations since any of the Fair Folk have been seen this side of the forest.”

“It was once tradition that all human rulers would invite the Fairies to celebrate the birth of a child. In Florestan it’s common even for the children of minor nobility to have fairy godmothers.”

“That may be, but Weihnacht isn’t Florestan. You may have grown up with them, but we haven’t seen Fairies here since before my grandfather’s time.”

“All the more reason to use this occasion to invite them back.” Briar put the finishing touches on her hair, patting the simple twist twice before nodding in satisfaction. “Come. It’s been years since I’ve seen Lily, and I want her to be the first to meet our daughter.”



The chapel felt crowded, despite its tall ceilings, long aisle, spacious seating, and limited number of occupants. The ceremonial portion of the christening was to be a private affair, with only the royal family, the priest, and a select few of the court in attendance. Even so, there was something heavy in the atmosphere of the room, and Philip anxiously pulled at the stiff collar of his formal shirt.

Briar stood off to the side, chatting quietly yet animatedly with a small, plump, grandmotherly figure in a flowing lilac dress. Though everything about her, from her round cheeks to the soft gray bun atop her head, seemed perfectly harmless, the pointed tips of her ears and the sharp, bright, intelligent light in her eyes betrayed the fact that she was likely the most powerful person in the room.

Lily, as Briar's fairy godmother, was the only representative of the Fair Folk that he had expected to come. Invitations had been sent to all the of the ruling families across the Fairy courts—their equivalent of kingdoms, as Briar had informed him—but as relations between Weihnacht and Fairy had been nonexistent for nearly a century, he did not have any reason to suspect that others would accompany her.

The priest was just preparing to call them over when a loud popping noise echoed off the stone walls, and a swirling circle of light appeared, hovering just a few feet above the floor. Guests gasped in surprise and shock as the image of a dense, lush forest appeared in the circle, and then five figures stepped through, seemingly out of the air.

The light disappeared with a flash. The newcomers—two men and three women—bowed respectfully towards the king and queen. The woman in the front of the group spoke first. She was dressed from head to toe in yellow, with sunflowers sewn to the hem of her long skirts and a crown of daisies in her flowing, chestnut hair. Her face was young, though her eyes were old and wise, and she spoke with a musical lilt.

"Your Majesties, we are pleased to accept your invitation to celebrate this joyous occasion with you. It is an honor to be present for the naming of our dear Friend's child." With these last words, she sent a beaming smile in Briar's direction. The queen's eyes were bright with happy tears, and she grinned happily in return.

The crowd watched in silence as the five Fairies moved to stand beside Lily. Briar joined Philip beside the priest, who cleared his throat and began the ceremony. It was short and simple, and at the conclusion the guests were formally introduced to Princess Holly Joy Auroris.

The sunbeam-yellow Fairy approached first, her hands glowing with a sparkling green light. "I am Helia of the Summer Court. We are honored to count Holly as a Friend and offer the gift of Beauty. May her presence bring the sunshine through even the darkest times."

Helia held her hand up to her face. The light formed into a flower, and she blew gently, scattering petals of light that swirled through the air and settled onto Holly's face before disappearing. She stepped back, making room for the next Fairy.

A short, raven-haired man with a trim, pointed beard and sharp cheekbones stepped forward next. His brown and gold jacket was embroidered with leaves and vines. "My name is Khrysos," he said, bowing at the waist. "The Autumn Court is honored to count Princess Holly as a friend. Our blessing is the gift of Dance. May

her steps and heart be as light as the falling leaves.” With a flourish, a golden light streamed from his fingers and looped around the infant in the queen’s arms.

The other Fairies each took a turn bestowing a blessing upon the princess.

“I am Alba of the Winter Court. We are honored to count Princess Holly as a friend and offer the blessing of Wit. May her mind be as sharp and keen as the winter wind.”

“My name is Eben. The Night Court is honored to count Princess Holly as a friend and bestow the gift of Song. May her voice be as beautiful and soft as the velvet night sky, and may her words bring light in the darkness.”

“I am Morwen of the Day Court. We are honored to count Princess Holly as a friend, and we offer the gift of Grace. May her heart be untroubled by enmity or spite, and may her reign be marked by the promise of new beginnings.”

As Morwen, a tall, graceful woman with golden hair and sky-blue eyes in a dress as light and airy as the sunrise, returned to her place, Lily stepped forward with a fond smile.

“I am Lily of the Spring Court. We are honored—”

Her words were cut off by a resounding *crack* that rang throughout the room. A cloud of black smoke rose up from the floor, curling away as it dissipated to reveal a fierce, dragonsque woman covered in black from head to toe. Her dress was embellished with lace that resembled spiderwebs and studded with glittering obsidian and black onyx. Her lips were painted a dark, blood red, contrasting starkly with her pale skin and drawing attention to the terrifyingly beautiful features of her face.

Helia gasped and covered her mouth. “Caryssa. What are you doing here?”

The dark woman raised a sculpted eyebrow as she slowly swiveled her head to face the Summer Fairy. “What am I doing here?” she repeated. Her voice was low and velvety smooth. “Why, Helia, I was *invited*.”

“It’s true,” Briar announced, taking a step forward. Her face was slightly pale, but she kept her voice from quavering. “We sent invitations to all the ruling families of Fairy, including the LeVolens. They have always been welcome in Florestan.”

Rather than responding, Caryssa turned in a slow circle, her eyes taking in every inch of the chapel and causing the guests to shrink away as her attention washed over them. “But this isn’t Florestan, is it?” she finally said.

Briar pulled her shoulders back and held her chin high. “It is not. But as a member of the Florestanian royal family, I extend the same hospitality here in Weihnacht.”

“It’s been a long time since I’ve seen the inside of this chapel.”

“Oh?” Briar did her best to keep her voice polite and even. Philip stood beside her and wrapped a protective arm around her waist.

“Oh yes,” Caryssa answered absently. “Nearly a hundred of your human years.” She reached out a hand and ran one of her long fingers over the edge of the chapel pew, then brushed her fingers together as her nose wrinkled in distaste. “Tell me, Your Majesty, do you know why it’s been so long?”

“I can’t say that I do.”

“It was an event quite similar to this one actually.” The dark Fairy crossed her arms and tapped a finger against her chin. “King Raul and Queen Talia had just had a sweet little baby boy—that would be your grandfather,” she directed her comment to Philip. “And they were holding a christening just like this. Do you see the similarities?”

“I...I do.” Briar held her daughter a little closer to her chest.

"Except there was one difference." Caryssa's lips formed an exaggerated pout, and she dropped her chin, blinking wide, innocent eyes. The effect was unnerving. "They forgot to invite me. Apparently timid little Talia was afraid that I wouldn't bestow a proper blessing upon the dear child. The LeVolens are known for their connection to the Court of Death, you see."

"I—"

"They tried to play it off as a mistake, saying that the master of ceremonies must simply have missed my name on the invitation list. But I know the truth: they didn't want me there."

Briar frowned. "I'm truly sorry, Caryssa."

"Oh, don't be." A gleeful cackle accompanied the words. "Because the time has finally come for me to have my revenge."

"But that was nearly a hundred years ago!" King Philip protested.

Caryssa sneered. "A hundred of your *human* years, which is nothing to us in Fairy. You may have forgotten, but I haven't. But no matter," her sneer changed to a calculating smile. "It's time for my gift. I am Caryssa of the House of LeVolens, and I am honored to present Princess Holly with the gift that the Auroris line has long deserved. Before the sun sets on the princess's sixteenth birthday, she will prick her finger and *die*."

With a cackle of laughter, she flung her hands forward, sending a stream of dark mist hurtling towards the young princess. Briar cried out and turned her back, desperate to shield her child from the curse, but the mist parted around her, intent on finding its mark.

The room was thrown into chaos as the guests in attendance screamed. Guards rushed the dark Fairy, who disappeared with a flash and a bang, causing them to fall over one another in a disoriented heap. Princess Holly started wailing, her sharp cries of pain and fear carrying over the rest of the tumult.

Briar raised wild, tearful eyes to her husband. "What can we do? We have to do something. We can't just let her die."

Lily stepped forward, placing a hand on her arm. "I still have my gift to bestow."

The room fell suddenly into a hushed, suspenseful silence.

"Can you remove the curse?" Philip's voice was a tense, desperate whisper.

Instead of answering right away, Lily placed her hand on Holly's head. The baby's cries were reduced to mewling whimpers. Her eyebrows drew together in a frown of intense concentration, and a soft pink light settled around the princess.

"I cannot remove the curse entirely," the Fairy godmother admitted, opening her eyes and looking into Briar's face with soft empathy. "But I can alter it. Holly will indeed prick her finger, but she will not die. Instead, she will fall into a deep sleep."

Briar and Philip exchanged tear-filled glances. "She'll only be sleeping?" the queen asked hopefully.

Philip pressed his lips together in a firm line. "Will she awaken?"

"She will. When a hundred years have passed, she will be awakened by a king's son. It was a son who started the feud, and a son will end it."

"A...a king's son? But after a hundred years, how will they know? How can we be sure that the one who wakes her is worthy? How—"

King Philip laid a hand on his wife's shoulder. "It won't matter," he stated resolutely. "If she doesn't prick her finger, she won't fall asleep." He turned to Lily. "The curse will only take effect if it happens before her sixteenth birthday?"

"Before the sun sets on that day, yes."

He straightened his regal shoulders. "Then all we have to do is ensure that she avoids anything sharp until that day has passed."



16 years later...

"We were so close," Queen Briar sobbed as she held her daughter's limp hand. Princess Holly had been laid in her tower room, dressed in a soft nightgown and covered in a blanket as if she were simply laying down for a night of rest. "We were so near to being free of that awful curse forever. We should never have let our guard down."

King Philip said nothing, pacing restlessly up and down the length of the small room. Lily stood by the door, having been summoned the moment Holly was found.

"How can we prepare?" He ran a hand distractedly through the ends of hair that was just beginning to gray at the temples. "If she's to sleep for a hundred years, how can we be sure that whoever awakens her is worthy of her?" He paused in his pacing to gaze at his beloved daughter. Her face was peaceful and relaxed, beautiful in sleep even without the lively light that lit her eyes.

"What do you mean?" Briar tore her eyes away from Holly long enough to look at him with a frown.

"If the neighboring kingdoms find out about this, it will only be a matter of time before they leverage the information for their advantage." He sighed. "And in a century, you and I will be long gone."

Lily cleared her throat. "Not necessarily."

Philip spun on his heel. "What do you mean?"

"While Princess Holly sleeps, I can lay an enchantment on everyone in the castle. For as long as she sleeps, you will as well, to be woken when her own curse is lifted. The curse will be broken by a king's son; there is nothing in the wording that states he must also marry her."

It was Briar's turn to argue. "But in the stories you used to tell me—"

Lily clicked her tongue. "A kiss of true love is a powerful counter-curse, but ineffective in this case. How will she fall in love while asleep? A king's son will be enough."

Philip resumed his pacing. "But what about protection? If everyone inside the castle is asleep, how can we keep her safe?"

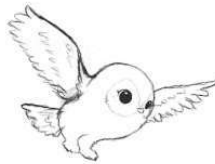
"Leave that to me."

Two hours later, the castle descended into silence as Lily's enchantment took effect. King Philip and his family, gathered together in their favorite sitting room, slumped over in a deep sleep. The servants, dismissed to their rooms for the day, followed suit. On the outside, holly hedges grew up around the walls, forming a barrier of thorny leaves and poisonous berries that grew thickly over every possible entrance and up the side of the walls. Up in the tallest tower, Princess Holly lay still in a dreamless sleep.

Until the clock struck twelve.

Chapter Five

*When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter,
I sprang from the bed to see what was the matter.*



Dominic's fingers tightly clenched the arms of his chair as he held back a frustrated growl. The Duke of Rodel's private office was warm and cozy, furnished with dark wood furniture that was polished until it gleamed in the light of the crackling fire. Bookshelves filled with old books covered nearly every wall, and the smell of parchment and leather and ink hung in the air. Dark red cushions on the chair contrasted with leather and brass accents, surprisingly comfortable despite their definite masculine aesthetic.

"I don't understand," Dominic argued. "If you agree that the people of Rodel are struggling, why won't you let me do something about it?" The duke sat across from him, behind a large, imposing wooden desk that was covered in neat stacks of paper and open ledgers. The duke himself was just as imposing, with broad shoulders and a serious face. His square jaw, aquiline nose, and thick, dark brows were softened only by the sympathetic light in his eyes. Streaks of gray peppered his dark hair, which was combed neatly back.

The duke sighed deeply. "We've been through this before, Nic. It's not quite as simple as you would like it to be. It's not only Rodel, but the whole kingdom that is affected by these prolonged winters. I simply do not have the resources to help the whole of Weihnacht, and as regent, I cannot afford to be seen as showing partiality."

"I'm not saying you have to help everyone; just the ones who truly need it." Nic pulled frustrated fingers through his hair, sending it into a disarray that contrasted starkly with the polished and refined gentleman across from him.

"And how would you determine who does and does not receive help? Are you going to be personally visiting each home in Weihnacht?"

"I could," Dominic answered stubbornly. *I do.*

The duke shook his head. "It's simply not feasible, son. For every honest citizen willing to accept our help, there are three more who would take advantage of our goodwill and hoard or steal our resources in order to make a profit. And that's without mentioning those who are truly in need but too proud to ask for help."

Dominic deflated. "That's what Myran said."

“That young man has a good head on his shoulders. If he didn’t have such a way with the animals, I would have half a mind to train him as my secretary.”

“I don’t think you could convince him to leave the stables.”

“An unfortunate truth.” The duke gave him a sad smile. “While I appreciate your fervor and passion for helping, simply giving away our resources is neither sustainable nor practical. We need to look for a long-term solution that can benefit the entire kingdom, such as your suggestion of building greenhouses.”

“That wasn’t actually my idea,” Dominic answered, leaning back in his chair and closing his eyes. “I’ve been writing letters back and forth with a friend, and she mentioned reading about them in a book, though on a smaller scale.”

“*She*, eh?” Dominic could hear the sudden interest in the duke’s voice. “I didn’t realize your correspondent was female. Who exactly is this friend?”

He cracked one eye open. The duke was studying him keenly with his brows raised in curiosity. “Her name’s Joy.”

The duke hummed thoughtfully and repeated the name. “Joy. You should ask her if she has any other brilliant ideas. Better yet, invite her here so that I can hear them, too. I’m sure your mother would be happy to host her.”

Dominic pinched the bridge of his nose. “Please don’t start planting any ideas in her head. She’ll be hearing wedding bells and planning a ceremony before the night is out. To be perfectly honest, though Joy and I have been writing letters for a year now, we’ve never actually met. She’s been ill and confined to her home.”

“Which is?”

“I’m not entirely sure. We exchange our letters in the park.” Dominic held up a hand when the duke frowned slightly and opened his mouth as if to voice an objection. “And before you start accusing her of something, you should know that never once has she angled for money or anything else. She doesn’t even know my last name. In fact, I would say that, of the two of us, I have benefitted the most from our exchange.”

The duke steepled his fingers together under his chin. A moment of thoughtful silence followed. “I can’t argue with the results of your correspondence thus far, and I trust your judgment.”

Dominic smiled at the rare words of spoken praise.

“But I still think you should invite her.”

“I have,” he answered quickly. “That is, I asked her if we could finally meet.”

“And?”

“I haven’t had an answer yet.” He shifted uncomfortably at the reminder, and all his earlier misgivings and insecurities raised their voices in the back of his mind. He stubbornly shut them out. “But it’s only been a few days. Sometimes it takes her up to a week to answer my letters.”

That only happened once, and it was after a particularly heavy snowstorm. But perhaps she’s been ill again?

“Well, when she does, be sure to extend the invitation.” The duke straightened and pulled a ledger book in front of him, slipping a pair of spectacles from his breast pocket and motioning with one hand that Dominic was dismissed.

With a nod of thanks, he rose and made his way to the door.

“Oh, and Nic?” The duke tilted his nose down to look at him over the rim of his lenses. “Next time you decide to go sliding down chimneys, give the poor maids some notice so that they know to wash your clothes last.”

Dominic shrugged one shoulder and gave him a sheepish grin. “Yes, Father.”



The cold wind bit his cheeks and nose as Dominic's sled flew over the snow. The stars were once again hidden behind a thick layer of clouds, and the moonlight was pale and muted. His delivery had been simple and straightforward that evening—just a quick slip in and out through the window, leaving behind some toys, a bundle of food in the kitchen, and a few pieces of gold in the shoes. It was one of his last, as the number of coins left in his personal treasury had quickly dwindled down to practically nothing.

There has to be something else I can do—some other way to come up with the resources we need.

He frowned and fingered the folded edges of the letter in his pocket. The other letters from Joy he kept safely tucked away in a drawer beside his bed, but this one was special. It was the one that had encouraged him to take ownership of the situation and spurred him into his current course of action.

It was also the first letter that had given him reason to hope that perhaps their friendship could grow into something deeper. He had read it over so many times that the words were permanently engraved into his mind.

Dear Nic,

Polite interactions would doubtless dictate that I express sorrow on behalf of your mental anguish, but I simply can't.

In fact, I'm glad.

Now, before you think me heartless, hear me out: The very fact that the state of the kingdom causes you distress means that your heart is not cold nor your eyes blind to the plight of the people around you. Your worry and anxiety are a sign that you not only see the problems, but also have the desire to fix them.

So fix them.

*Not all of them, obviously. Even someone as smart and devoted and driven as yourself would be unable to solve all the problems of an entire kingdom. It would be impossible and unfair to ask of you. But I am sure there are **some** things that you could do, if you just open your eyes to the possibilities around you. Don't think on a large scale; the kingdom is made up of thousands of individuals. A hundred small deeds of kindness can be more impactful than one grand gesture.*

You have such a warm and caring heart and a desire to serve others (that much is clear from your letters, though I have not had the pleasure of witnessing them in person). Take a look around you and see what there is that you can do in small ways. Can you chop a pile of wood for your neighbor to keep them warm through these cold nights? Can you deliver a loaf of bread or a basket of eggs? Can you offer encouragement or a kind smile? Find the ways that you can serve, and do them.

You may not be able to change the financial and economic state of the kingdom, but you can do something even more powerful:

You can bring hope and love.

If anyone can do it, Nic, you can.

Joy

The familiar dark shapes of the trees met him as he entered the park. The footprints in the snow revealed that there had been a few visitors since the night before, but they had limited themselves to the area just inside the main entrance. Dominic's heart fell a little at the sight, though he supposed that it was possible for Joy's letter to have been placed in the tree before the majority of the snow had fallen.

Though that would mean whoever is carrying her letters would have been wandering about in the dead of night, and I doubt she would do that to them.

Still, he made his way to their tree and forced himself to check the knothole.

Nothing.

Blowing out a dejected sigh, Dominic laced his fingers together behind his neck and let his head fall backwards. He blinked up towards the skies, fighting the feelings of hopelessness and hurt that sprang to life in his chest.

Maybe there's a good reason for her silence. Perhaps she's traveling, or she's been unwell.

A logical voice in the back of his mind argued against this, pointing out that Joy likely would have told him if she were planning on leaving town, and that she had been ill before, but still managed to find time to write.

What if it was too fast? What if she feels pressured into more of a relationship than we actually have? I thought that she might feel the same way I do, but what if I was wrong?

The resident owl in the tree alighted on a branch not far from him, hooting low and soft.

"I need to write to her again," he decided, turning towards the bird. "Even if we never meet in person, she needs to know that I value her friendship."

The owl just stared at him with bright, unblinking eyes.

Dominic sighed and turned, looking instead up at the looming walls of the castle in the distance. "What we really need is to have a king again. Or a king's fortune." He chuckled mirthlessly.

As he watched, a flickering light appeared in one of the windows of the top floor. He blinked and shook his head, sure that his mind was imagining the light as it floated along and then disappeared. With a shiver, he remembered all the folktales and stories surrounding the royal family and the way they had all mysteriously disappeared.

He narrowed his eyes and muttered to himself, "If they really did just disappear, what happened to everything in the castle? If Weihnacht were taken over by a foreign nation, it would make sense that all of the riches would be taken. But that didn't happen. The castle was just closed off one morning." Dominic's mind spun. "That means that everything that was in the castle a hundred years ago could still be there. There might be enough wealth to feed the entire kingdom for a year."

The light appeared again for a moment, this time on the ground level, before it blinked out of existence. Dominic pushed all thoughts of ghosts from his mind and turned towards his sled with a determined stride. He kept a stout knife strapped to the side of the sled—a precaution just in case he ever found himself in a situation that would require cutting the dogs loose of their leather harnesses—and he retrieved the blade.

The holly hedge seemed thicker the closer he came to the iron fence. The sharp, thorny spikes on the leaves jutted out menacingly, and in the pale moonlight the berries looked like tiny drops of blood among the leaves. With a heavy downward strike, Dominic began hacking away at the hedge to reveal the gate underneath.

It was slow going. The holly stems, either due to age or some unnatural force, were much stronger than he expected, and Dominic had to stop several times to rest his aching, burning arms. His hands were covered in dozens of tiny scrapes and cuts from the prickly leaves, and the tips of his fingers were numb with cold. Finally, nearly two hours later, he had cleared enough of the hedge to access the filigreed gate.

The gate had been secured shut with a chain, the lock of which was thankfully brittle enough from age and rust that all it took was a few blows from the hilt of his knife to break it open. Dominic pulled the chains free and dropped them to the frozen ground beside him.

I should have the sled nearby in case there's anything to carry.

He whistled for the dogs, who obediently trotted over, pulling the empty sled. With a deep breath, Dominic pushed against the gate.

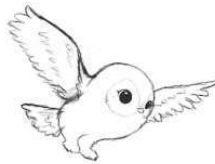
It didn't budge.

He grabbed hold of the iron bars and shook, then tried pushing against it with his shoulder, but the gate still remained stuck. With a growl of frustration, he hopped backwards a few steps and then jumped forward to land a well-aimed kick on the center of the door.

With a loud, metallic screech, the gate swung open with such force that it clattered against the fence. Dominic's momentum carried him forward until he landed sprawling in the snow in the shadow of the castle tower. The dogs, thinking it was all in good fun, dashed in after him.

Chapter Six

*The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow
Gave the lustre of mid-day to objects below,
When, what to my wondering eyes should appear
But a miniature sleigh, and eight tiny reindeer*



The deafening screech of metal startled Holly out of the pages of the book before her, sending her to her feet with a yelp. She held a hand over her pounding heart in the silence that followed, taking deep breaths to calm the erratic beating.

Who immediately left her perch on the back of the sofa where they had been sitting and flew over to the window above the desk. Holly followed, curiosity winning over fright. She pressed her forehead to the glass and looked down into the yard below.

“Oh!” she gasped.

A figure rose from the snow-covered ground, brushing off arms and shoulders and shaking the powdery flakes from his head. At least, Holly assumed it was a man. It was difficult to make out any distinguishing features from such a distance and in the moonlight, but the fact that the figure wore trousers and was out alone in the dead of night strongly favored her man hypothesis.

It was surprising enough to see another human of any kind after a century of solitude that Holly nearly missed the other occupants of the grounds. “Who! Are those dogs?”

The eight dogs were arranged in two straight rows and attached to what seemed to be some sort of sled.

“They *are* dogs! And look how clever! They must be his little team of carriage horses, but much easier to feed and more fun to cuddle.” Holly watched in fascination as the man began slowly walking towards the castle. “Do you think he’ll come in?” Her whispered voice was half trepidation, half hope.

Who flapped her wings and hooted softly. She jumped up to Holly’s shoulder.

“I know, I know. We have no idea who he is. But he doesn’t look like a ruffian.”

The owl nipped at her cheek.

“Ow! Okay, I admit I don’t know what a ruffian would look like exactly. But he certainly doesn’t look dangerous; only curious.”

The man, after examining the holly-covered wall, whistled for his dogs. They obediently responded, bringing the sled up close to him. He hopped on the back and

called out a soft command that Holly was too far away to hear. They started moving away slowly, keeping close to the castle walls.

She watched until he was out of sight. "Where do you think he went?"

Holly grabbed her candle and made her way down to the kitchen, her ears on high alert for any sound of visitors. Just like every other night, however, the silence reigned supreme. After letting Who out through the kitchen window, she returned to her desk just in time to catch a glimpse of the dog-guided sled as it exited through the gates.

She sighed. "Well, I suppose it's for the best, anyway. It's not as if I would make for a very good hostess. What would I do, offer him a potato?"

A weak laugh followed her half-hearted joke. She leaned her head against the desk and pulled out her last letter from Nic. Her heart ached with loneliness. After days of consideration, she had finally scrawled off a hasty reply to his request, informing him of her regret that she was unable to meet him. She had tried to word it as kindly as possible, but a twisted feeling in her gut worried that that it was too little, too late.

"What if he finds no reason to continue our correspondence? It's bound to happen eventually. After all, I'm sure that at some point he'll find a wife and get married, and I'm sure she wouldn't be thrilled about the idea of him exchanging letters with another woman. I certainly wouldn't." Her heart rebelled at the thought of Nic with another woman.

"No," she told herself sternly. "That's just being petty. You have no claim on him, Holly. Besides, have you forgotten that a king's son must be the person to break the curse? And unless he's some sort of prince from a neighboring kingdom in disguise, there's no point in becoming overly attached."

She closed her eyes and rubbed her temples with a sigh. "It's no use. Scolding myself is like talking to a wall. Like it or not, my heart *is* attached. It was from the moment he answered my first letter. Though he will never know it, Nic will always hold the distinction of being both my first love...and likely my first heartbreak as well."

To distract herself from the morose and lonely thoughts, Holly retrieved her pile of letters and made her way through the sleeping bodies to her room. She snuggled into the blankets, reading by candlelight until the cursed sleep pulled her back under.

Joy,

It's too soon to tell the outcome, of course, but we finished construction on the community greenhouses this last week. The townspeople seem excited, if tentatively so, and we are hopeful that this will at least supplement the wheat crops enough to tide us through the next winter. I will admit, I am not the biggest fan of leafy greens (a glass of milk and a warm cookie will always sound much more appealing to me), but I think I will learn to love them if it means more of our people can be fed.

*In all of my excitement, however, I have failed to ask how **your** family is doing in all of this. Are you well? Do you have enough to eat? I can't help everyone in Weihnacht, but I will do everything in my power to help you, if I can. You have been more of a blessing than you realize.*

Dash is doing well. He's in the mischievous, teething puppy stage right now (I am now the owner of an appalling number of single slippers), but my friend Ron must have some sort of Fairy magic or something about him, because all he has to do is say a few quiet words in Dash's direction and that little guy immediately listens. My father wasn't too keen on the idea of dogs at first, but I think even he will admit after seeing Ron work with Dash that they won't be any trouble.

My next letter will be slightly delayed; I'm traveling with my father for work, and we plan on being gone for nearly a week. I'm excited to go, but I will admit the thought of not being able to hear from you takes a little bit of the enjoyment out of it. Your letters have become some of my favorite parts of the week.

Nic



Joy,

I was so glad to find your letter when I returned. Your letters are like a bright spot of sunshine on a cloudy day; it's almost uncanny how you always have the right words to say.

I'm glad to hear that your family is mostly unaffected by this infernal, eternal winter (I know it's really neither of those, but it does feel like it, and I thought you would appreciate the wordplay). If only the rest of the kingdom were half so fortunate.

It's worse than I feared, Joy. The people of Weihnacht are slowly withering away. Hunger and poverty seem to be the norm, and those who aren't struggling to make enough money just to feed their families are in danger of being robbed or murdered by those who are. I've never seen a people so hopeless.

*I can't help but wish for someone to **do** something. We can't continue on this way forever; there is no future here. I sometimes wish we could just wake up and find out this has all been a bad dream.*

Nic



Joy,

As always, you have just the right words to say. You are absolutely correct, and I am working through a few ideas of my own. I will report back to you on whether or not they are a success.

I'm not sure how to ask this next part, though I feel as if I know you well enough to know that you won't be offended, even if it does seem forward of me. Let me preface this by saying you are free to completely disregard my request if you wish, but though I can easily hear your voice in my head by the way you write, I have no idea how to picture your face. It seems odd to ask, but can you tell me what you look like? Do you have dark hair or light? Are your eyes blue or brown?

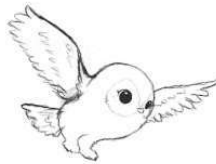
For my part, I will be completely honest in saying that though I have finally reached a height tall enough to be considered average, I definitely am much closer in build to my sister than I am to my father. I take after my mother's side of the family; they all have much finer features and slimmer builds than the typical Weihnacht stock. We also have blonde hair the color of straw and blue eyes. My mother laughs and says that when she sees me and my sister together, we're like the perfect combination of vanilla and chocolate.

So now you can picture me while you read your letters—the tiny man with yellow hair, blue eyes, and a smattering of freckles. You can also know that, in almost every case, if I am writing to you, I am also smiling.

Nic

Chapter Seven

*And then, in a twinkling, I heard on the roof
The pawing and prancing of each little hoof.
As I drew in my head, and was turning around,
Down the chimney St. Nicholas came with a bound.*



“Ron, I’ve figured it out!” Dominic entered the barn with a triumphant grin. Dash, as usual, was following at his heels, and the dog took off with an excited bark when he caught sight of the other sled dogs curled up together in the piles of warm straw. Tails thumped against the hard dirt floor as Dominic approached, and he scratched them each behind the ears.

“Figured what out? How to hang the harnesses by yourself when you bring everything back in the middle of the night?” Myran appeared from behind a stall door, wiping his hands down the front of his pants.

Dominic cringed. “Sorry about that, Ron. The wagon was missing, and I wasn’t able to move the barrels close enough to the wall to stand on.”

“A few weeks of mucking stalls would get you strong enough to move them,” Myran answered, crossing his arms in challenge.

“It’s not the arm strength that’s the problem.” Dominic rolled his eyes. “It’s the length of the arms and not being able to get enough leverage.”

“Hmmm. Whatever you say.” Myran dodged the playful punch that Dominic aimed at his arm. “Now, what is it that you figured out? You can tell me while you clean the harnesses that you left on the ground.” He tossed a rag and a jar of the sticky oil and wax mixture that was used to clean the saddles.

Dominic fumbled as he caught them, holding them against his chest and nearly dropping the jar, but he followed Myran’s directions without complaining. He sat down on the barrel he had mentioned before and picked up one of the dog harnesses, working the mixture carefully into the leather.

“The resource problem.”

His friend grabbed another rag and joined him. His eyes widened in surprise. “Did the duke agree to help?”

“Not in the way that I hoped. He, like you, is concerned that simply giving away wealth isn’t a sustainable solution.”

“Because it’s not.”

“Yes, and now he wants to train you as his secretary.”

Myran wrinkled his nose in distaste. "I would much rather muck stalls than take dictation or keep track of his appointments."

"So I've said, which is why he won't push the issue. Not only that, you're much too good at your job."

"Hmm. So, what is your solution, if not the duke's assistance?"

"I thought of it last night, actually, when I went to check the tree. What do you know about the castle?"

"The castle?" Myran frowned and his hands stilled. "Nothing, other than the fact that it's supposedly haunted. People have said that you can sometimes see a ghostly light flickering in the windows."

"They're not wrong; I think I saw something like that myself last night. But that's beside the point. I was thinking—according to every story I've ever heard, the royal family just disappeared. There wasn't an invasion or a war or a coup. One day they were gone and the holly hedge had grown up around the walls. No one went in or out from that point on."

Myran's hands resumed their task. "Well, there was the matter of the curse."

"Curse?"

"Don't you know? I suppose Fairies are nearly a forgotten subject here in Weihnacht. The last king, Philip, and his wife had a baby girl who was cursed by a Fairy to prick her finger and die before her sixteenth birthday."

Dominic grimaced. "That's awful. Why?"

"Apparently there was some sort of grudge between that Fairy and the royal family." Myran shrugged. "At any rate, it's hardly a coincidence that the entire royal family disappeared the day of the princess's sixteenth birthday."

A shiver ran down Dominic's spine. Suddenly, the ghost theory did not seem nearly as far-fetched. He gave his head a small shake and set his shoulders. "Regardless, the fact remains that the family just disappeared. The castle wasn't taken by a foreign enemy."

"And?"

"And that means that whatever was in the castle at the time of the curse—or whatever happened—is probably still there. If our king was anything like the other kingdoms, he didn't exactly live in poverty."

"What exactly are you saying?" There was an edge of unease in Myran's voice.

"I'm saying that, as things stand, it's likely that there is enough wealth to feed all of Weihnacht for at least a year just sitting in that abandoned building, gathering dust."

Myran's eyebrows shot up. "You're going to rob the castle?"

"What?" Dominic's head reared back in surprise. "No; I'm going to use the wealth of Weihnacht to help support its citizens. Everything that's in there was likely paid for by taxes, anyway, and it's not as if we have a royal family now to claim it. Why should it sit there when it could be put to better use?"

His friend did not appear convinced. "I don't know, Nic..." he said slowly. "This seems like quite the gray area."

"Ron, the entire kingdom is slowly dying. We need *something*. If the king were around, we would look to him to be the one responsible for helping us. This is just using the same resources that he would have at his disposal."

Myran blew out a long breath and wiped his hands slowly on the rag. "Alright. Tell me what you need from me."

Dominic grinned. "First of all, a pair of gloves would be helpful. How do you feel about paying your mother a visit?"



It was amazing the difference warm hands made. Myran's mother had been more than happy to supply him with a pair of soft knitted mittens, as well as a package of warm cookies wrapped in brown paper. She seemed to take it as a personal affront when, no matter how many treats she plied him with, Dominic never grew as tall or broad as her own sons.

It never stopped her from trying, though.

The skies had finally cleared. A blanket of stars glittered in the soft black velvet, the starlight made all the brighter by the fact that there was no moon. Combined with the sparkling snow on the ground, the effect was almost magical.

As Dash and Dancer led the team through the park, Dominic hesitated as they came close to the tree. It had been nearly a week now without any response to his letter, and he wasn't sure if he should even bother checking again. He absentmindedly rubbed a hand over the ache in his chest.

How is it possible to miss someone you've never met so much?

At the last moment, he called the dogs to halt. Dominic moved towards the tree with his usual stealth, then paused when he realized that the owl sentry was nowhere in sight.

He frowned.

Then again, it is a wild animal—and a nocturnal one at that. There's no reason to expect that it would never hunt this time of night. Even if it never has once in the last year...

Dominic reached into the knothole, steeling himself for disappointment. To his surprise, the rustle of paper met his ears. He fumbled about, unable to grab the letter with his mittened fingers, before pulling off his right mitten with his teeth and plucking the paper from the hole.

It was folded neatly, as usual, and sealed with a dot of red wax. With his heart hammering in his chest, Dominic broke the seal and held the letter close to his nose as he squinted hard, devouring the contents of the letter.

Dear Nic,

I'm deeply sorry, but I will not be able to meet with you on Deus Natus Eve. Indeed, I don't know that the day will ever come that I will see you outside. My condition, as you know, is a unique one, and the more years that go by, the more certain it is that I shall be confined to my bed for the rest of my life.

I understand that this is a disappointment; it is to me, as well. I hope that you will still continue our exchange, even if it can never lead to the kind of relationship you seek. You are my dearest friend, and I cherish our correspondence.

Yours,

Joy

He read the words over twice before Dominic let his hand with the paper fall to his side. He let out a bark of relieved laughter and rubbed his mittened hand on the back of his head. "She doesn't hate me, Dash," he cheered quietly. "And not only does she want to continue writing letters, but she also says she 'cherishes our correspondence.' It may not be exactly what we wanted, but it's certainly a step in the right direction." His eyes caught once again on the word *yours* and a wide grin split his face. It was replaced almost immediately by a sober expression. "Though it

is concerning that she'll be confined to her bed for the rest of her life. But if she can't leave her house, maybe someday she'll be willing to let me come to her."

Dominic read the letter over once more before folding it neatly and tucking it away into the pocket of his jacket. He pulled his mitten back on and bounded back over to the dog sled with a lighter heart than he had possessed in weeks.

Not only did he have a solution for the people of Weihnacht, but he also had Joy's friendship.

And she signed her letter with "yours."



The roof was much higher than Mrs. Hubbard's. For the first time since talking everything over with Myran, Dominic was beginning to doubt the wisdom of his plan. He swapped the soft mittens for a pair of leather gloves as he craned his neck back to look up the wall. The edge of the roof was a solid thirty feet above the ground, and then he would have to scramble up the shingled slip to reach any of the many chimneys.

He had hoped to find a window with an open latch, but the hedge was so thick that it was nearly impossible to even tell where the windows on the ground level were. The one he had found—to what he imagined was the kitchen, based on the corner location and the tumbled-down remains of garden beds and retaining walls to mark off the kitchen garden—was too small to be accessible, even for his slight frame. The few windows that were visible on the third floor were not meant to open, which meant the only course of entry left to him was from the rooftop.

Dominic scanned the wall and roof, mentally plotting his ascent. He hoped that the holly branches were sturdy enough to hold his weight, and for one of the first times in his life, he thanked Deus that he wasn't brawny and bulky like Myran.

"Here goes nothing, Dash," he whispered. "Blitz, if I fall, I want you to run as fast as you can and get Myran, alright?"

The dogs wagged their tails and watched with grinning, panting mouths.

Dominic tugged the sleeves of his jacket down as far over his wrists as they would go and threw a coil of rope and his sack over his shoulder. This time he would be leaving with it full. He stepped up to the holly hedge, wrapped his hand around a thick branch, and began to climb.

It was tedious and nerve-racking work. Unlike vines, the hedge had not actually grown into the wall, merely adjacent to it, and Dominic was forced to angle himself so that gravity kept him braced against the stone walls, even while he searched for hand and foot holds among the branches. There were several times when he slipped or lost his balance, and he was sure that he was about to go hurtling towards the ground below.

Finally, with burning limbs and adrenaline coursing through his veins, Dominic reached the edge of the roof. He pulled himself over and flopped onto his back, breathing heavily.

"Well," he wheezed up to the sky, "at least on the way down I'll have the rope."

With a labored groan, he rolled over and pushed himself up onto his knees. The roof was sloped, but not too steep, and he clambered quickly across to the closest chimney. He first tied his rope around the base, leaving most of it in a coiled heap at his feet. He peered over the edge of the chimney, finding it, as he expected, nothing

but a dark hole.

"The good news is, I don't have to be afraid of ghosts building a fire suddenly in the hearth," he encouraged himself before tossing the rope down the chimney. Although he was fairly certain he could brace himself against the sides, just as he did with Mrs. Hubbard's flue, if there was room it would be easier to just slide down the rope.

And with the way his arms and shoulders were burning after climbing up the wall, Dominic definitely wanted easier.

He exhaled heavily. "Here we go."

Dominic perched on the side of the chimney for just an instant before lowering himself down and grabbing hold of the rope. He wrapped his feet around it and started sliding down, immensely thankful for the leather gloves that Myran had found for him in the barn.

The darkness surrounded him as he descended, leaving only a patch of starry sky visible above. He braced himself for a long journey down but was surprised when his feet hit the floor after only a few moments. He ducked down, crawling out of the hearth, and blinked in an effort to adjust his eyes to the dim light.

This must be the third floor; then.

Dominic turned in a slow circle, taking in the room. The furniture looked comfortable and cozy and was surprisingly well-preserved. No signs of moths or rot marred the cushions, and though the surfaces of the tables and the legs of the chairs were covered in dust, they appeared to be nearly brand new. Everywhere he looked, it was as if he were seeing a moment frozen in time, like life had simply stopped suddenly and without warning. There was a line stretched over the fireplace hung with stockings, as if the owners would come in at any moment looking for them to be dry. Even the desk in the corner, with its candle stub and piles of empty paper, looked as if they had been used just yesterday.

A shiver ran down his spine. The silence and darkness of the night, normally a welcome cover for his activities, pressed in around him. Dominic swallowed nervously and gripped the strap of his bag with both hands.

This is for Weihnacht. I am doing this for Weihnacht.

He stepped through the closest door, took one look around, and then immediately scrambled backwards, tripping over his own feet. His heart beat erratically in his chest, and he could hear the blood rushing in his ears. His hands shook.

The room beyond was full of bodies, all laid out in differing stages of repose.

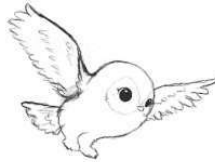
Nope. Nope, nope, nope. Not even Weihnacht is worth going in there again.

Dominic spun on his heel and moved in the opposite direction. He opened the other door carefully, peeking cautiously around it before letting out a relieved breath when a long hallway was the only thing that met his eyes. The tall windows let in the starlight, and he stood for a moment, catching his breath and allowing his fear to subside.

*Alright. As long as we can avoid any more rooms like **that**, let's see what this palace has to offer.*

Chapter Eight

*He was dressed all in fur, from his head to his foot,
And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot;
A bundle of toys he had flung on his back,
And he looked like a peddler just opening his pack.*



Holly watched the steam rise lazily from her potato as she pulled it from the boiling water with her fork.

"I am quite thankful for all that you bring me," she remarked casually to the group of owls that sat in their customary places on her table, "but what I wouldn't give for an apple pie. Or a piece of bread. Or even just some fruit." She rested her chin on her hand. "But I suppose beggars shouldn't be choosers. I'm thankful to be able to eat anything, at this point. If not for you dears, I do believe I would have withered away."

Why nudged the salt cellar over with her tiny feet.

"Why, thank you." Holly giggled at her own joke as she sprinkled salt over the potato in her hand. She set it down on the plate to cool.

"While we wait, why don't you tell me all about—"

Her words were cut short by a loud, crashing sound in the dining room. The noise lingered, and Holly recognized the sound of a metal plate rolling on the floor before coming to a stop. She turned wide eyes to the owls. "Did you let someone in?"

Who snapped her beak and hissed, pulling her head down between her shoulders.

"That's what I thought." Her hands trembled with excitement and fear, and her heart pounded in her chest. "Do you think it's the same man we saw yesterday?"

Holly pushed away from the table and straightened her nightgown. She picked up her candle in one hand and a small frying pan in the other. "If he's dangerous, Who, you distract him, and I'll knock him out." She considered for a moment. "But if it's a bear or some other wild animal, you just come back with me and we'll close the kitchen door."

Who flew to her shoulder and Holly stepped out of the kitchen, moving with swift, noiseless steps to the dimly lit dining room.

Though she had voiced the possibility of another human in the castle, her heart still faltered, and her knees went weak at the sight of a real, live person. Her shock and excitement were quickly turned to ire, however, when she saw that he was filling up a burlap sack with her family's silver plates and cutlery.

“Excuse me, were you even going to ask permission before using that?”

The figure started so violently at the sound of her words that he nearly jumped into the air. He shrieked as he spun around. His eyes were wide and wild in his dirty, soot-covered face. With his dusty jacket and lumpy sack, he reminded her very much of a peddler.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to frighten you.” Holly dropped her candle slightly to get a better view of him. He was not much taller than she was, and with his slim build and narrow shoulders, she guessed that he was not too far out of his adolescent years.

His voice caught. “A—are you a ghost?” His striking blue eyes stared at her in shock.

“I don’t think so.” She grinned. “Unless it would make you feel better if I said I was?”

He shook his head violently. “No. No, it would not. Are you...” He swallowed. “Were you one of the ones upstairs?”

Holly cocked her head at him.

“You’ve been upstairs? Oh! You must have come down the chimney; that would explain the soot. I can’t believe I never thought of that! But then, of course, there’s the matter of getting down.” She frowned and tapped her finger against her chin in thought.

“So, you were?” His face was beginning to look a little green.

“I was what? Right—one of the sleepers upstairs. I never answered you, did I? Sorry.” She wrinkled her nose. “Kind of? But I don’t think I was there when you came in. I’ve been down here for a while making dinner. Are you hungry? Would you like a potato?”

“A...potato?” The young man’s face twisted in bewildered confusion.

“I’m afraid I don’t have much else to offer. My hostess skills are severely out of practice.” Holly gave him an apologetic smile, when her eyes once more landed on his bulky sack. She froze, and her smile dropped away. “You were robbing us!”

He straightened at her words, and some of his earlier fear was replaced by determination. “I’m merely doing what the king would be doing if he were alive. The people of Weihnacht are poor and starving. There is enough silver in this room alone to buy enough food for the entire town of Rodel, and it’s just sitting here, gathering dust.”

Holly tilted her head as she considered him. He looked honest enough; the fire in his eyes when he spoke gave evidence to the fact that he truly believed his words. And he was right—if her father were awake, he would not have hesitated to sacrifice the silver if it meant saving the kingdom from starvation.

She gave a long, slow nod. “You have a point—about the silver, I mean. Not about the king; he’s sleeping right now, but he’s not actually dead.”

“He’s not...? But how...and who...?”

Who, hearing her name, nipped gently at the side of Holly’s head. “Oh, yes! How rude of me.” Holly transferred her frying pan so that it was sandwiched between her side and the upper part of the arm holding the candle. She held out her free hand. “My name is Holly.”

“Dominic.” The young man shook her hand with a slightly dazed expression. His grip was strong and firm, and the feeling of warm fingers wrapped around hers sent electricity crackling up her arm and caught her off guard. She stared dumbly at their joined hands.

The owl nipped at her ear again, and Holly quickly dropped his hand. Her fingers still tingled with the memory of his warmth. She gave her head a little shake to clear

it and rested her hand on Who's feathered feet. "And this is Who."

"What?"

"Oh, no. He's in the kitchen with the rest of Parliament."

"With who?"

"No, Who's right here, though she is a member as well."

Dominic blinked slowly. A moment of silence passed. Finally, "This is not at all going as I expected it would."

Holly turned on her heel and began walking back to the kitchen, motioning for him to follow. Despite the exciting turn of events, she could feel her allotted hours of wakefulness ebbing away. "How did you expect it would turn out?"

"I definitely didn't expect to find anyone living here, for one." Dominic trailed behind her like a lost puppy. "Wait, you said your name was Holly? Were you named after the princess?"

Holly raised an eyebrow as she looked at him over her shoulder. "Not exactly."

"What do you mean, 'not exactly'?"

She stepped into the kitchen, and they were greeted by curious chirps and hoots as the rest of the owls fluttered over to meet them. "I mean that it's rather hard to be named after yourself." Holly spun on her heel to find Dominic standing in the doorway, looking at the birds with wide eyes.

At her words, his eyes wrenched away from the owls and back to her face. His words were strangled with disbelief. "To be named after *who*?"

"No, this is Who." Holly motioned to the owl and only managed to keep a straight face for a few moments before dissolving into a fit of laughter. Who flew off her shoulder and landed on the table as she doubled over.

"I'm sorry," she said a moment later, wiping the tears of laughter from her eyes. "But this is going *exactly* as I always hoped it would. I just never thought I would have the chance to have this conversation with anyone." She took a deep breath and straightened, gesturing to the owls, who were watching with their bright, curious, unblinking eyes. "But let me introduce you to the Parliament."

"Parliament?"

"That's what a group of owls is called—a parliament."

"It's not a flock?"

"No. You could also call them a hooting or a stare, or a silence if they're flying." Holly was babbling, overcome with the euphoria of actually being able to converse with another person. "But I like parliament best. Besides, it makes it much more entertaining to be able to say I'm meeting with Parliament every night."

It was easier to get a good look at Dominic now that she had the firelight. Though small in frame, he held himself with confidence that made him seem larger than he was. There were laugh lines around his eyes and mouth, evidence that he must smile often, and Holly noticed that there was a shadow of stubble on his cheeks underneath the soot and ash.

He must be older than I thought.

Dominic was silent for a moment, eyeing the owls with something like trepidation. "Are they always in your kitchen?"

"They come most nights, though not all of them. Who is here the most often." Holly reached for her potato, now cooled, and held it out to him. "Are you hungry?"

"No, thank you." His voice was distant as he slowly pulled his gaze away from the birds. "Have you lived here long?"

Holly leaned back so that her hip rested against the edge of the table. She took a bite out of the potato as if it were an apple and chewed slowly before answering. "All my life."

“By yourself? Or is there someone else here, too?” Dominic looked around the dark kitchen as if someone else might jump out of the shadows at any moment.

“My family is here.” The ache of grief dulled over time twisted in Holly’s chest. It was a unique kind of torture, walking past her family every night and yet not being able to truly see or interact with them.

“Where?” Dominic turned in a full circle as he looked over his shoulder.

“Upstairs.”

He froze, and Holly could see the moment that realization dawned. “You’re...*that* Holly? The Princess Holly who disappeared along with the rest of the royal family?”

Holly crossed her arms. “We didn’t disappear. We fell asleep.”

“You look plenty awake to me. Besides, it’s been a hundred years. You can’t possibly expect me to believe that you’re the same princess.”

“Obviously you don’t know a whole lot about Fairy magic. It’s a curse, remember?”

Dominic’s face furrowed and he pressed his lips together. “I thought that was all just a legend.”

Holly’s jaw dropped in disbelief. “There’s historical record. Do they not teach history anymore in Weihnacht? When a disgruntled Fairy shows up to a christening and curses the baby, it tends to be noted for posterity.”

The young man shrugged. “All recent records concerning the royal family were lost when the castle was closed off.”

“Oh.”

“So, you’re saying that everyone in this castle has been asleep for the last century? But what about you? Why are you awake?”

“I’m not entirely sure. I sleep most of the time, except for a few hours in the middle of the night.” Holly glanced to the window, attempting to gauge the position of the moon, but the hedge blocked her view of the sky. “My theory is that it has to do with Lily altering the curse so that I would sleep instead of die.”

“Wait, *die*?” Dominic looked at her in horror.

She quickly recounted the events of her christening, finishing with, “Lily was the only Fairy who hadn’t yet given a blessing. She wasn’t strong enough to remove the curse entirely, but she was able to modify it.”

Dominic stood in stunned silence. Holly stifled a yawn, shifting slightly on her feet. She could feel the pull of sleep in the back of her mind.

“If the curse was only directed at you, why is everyone else asleep?”

She shrugged helplessly and released a tired sigh. “I don’t know. But it could be worse. At least I know they’re sleeping, and I’m not going to wake up and find out that everyone I’ve ever known is dead. It is rather lonely, though, and the quiet sometimes gets to me.”

Holly saw the moment that realization dawned on Dominic’s face. “You’ve been awake and alone here every night? That’s...” His words trailed off.

“Thirty-six thousand, five hundred and ten nights.” Holly pulled a chair over and sank down into it. “Almost ten years, if you add together all the hours.”

“That sounds awful.” His voice was quiet, and she looked up to see sympathy glowing in his eyes. He took a step forward. “I’m sorry.”

“The last few years have been more bearable. Once Who came along, at least there was someone to talk to.” She cringed slightly. “But I’m dreadfully out of practice carrying on real conversations, and I’m sure I must have come across as frightfully odd earlier.”

One side of his mouth pulled up in a grin. "A little quirky, yes, but intriguing, once I recovered from the shock of finding another person in here." He was quiet for a moment. "If it's a curse, there must be a way to break it, right?"

Holly exhaled a short laugh. "All I know is that Lily said it would be broken after a hundred years by a king's son. However, that deadline is fast approaching, and I don't see any princes lined up to come visit me. The castle is a little hard to get into, for one, and I don't think any of the neighboring kingdoms even remember that Weihnacht ever had a king to begin with."

"Oh, they do," Dominic muttered darkly. "It's why they think they can walk all over the regent. If we had never been a monarchy, they wouldn't treat him as an inferior. What happens if a hundred years pass and there's no prince?"

Holly waved her hand carelessly, trying to ignore the fear and dread that pooled in her stomach at the thought. She had often wondered the same thing herself. "Who knows? Maybe the last hundred years will catch up with me, and I'll die of old age. Or maybe the original curse will take effect, or maybe I'll finally get some uninterrupted sleep."

Dominic did not look at all convinced by her answer. "There must be some other way."

"There's not. You don't happen to have any princes who like to scale walls in your thieves' guild, do you?"

His head reared back in confusion. "In my what?"

Holly laughed. "You did come here with the intent of robbing us."

"But that doesn't make me a thief!"

She raised an eyebrow at his protest.

"Well, fine. It does. But it was only because I thought that this place was abandoned, and the people desperately need *something*."

The earnestness in his voice tugged at her heart, and Holly reached out and laid a hand on his arm, giving it a gentle squeeze. "I know. And as the crown princess of the kingdom, I fully approve." She yawned, unable to hold it in any longer, and pushed to her feet. "I need to get back to my room before I fall asleep on the floor. There's more silverware in that cabinet, and the key is hanging on a hook in the pantry. Take whatever you need."

Holly crossed the kitchen and opened the window for the owls, giving each of them an affectionate pet before they took off soundlessly into the night. She turned around to find Dominic watching her with a troubled yet determined expression. He slung his bag over his shoulder and fell into step beside her as she started the long walk back up to her tower room.

"There must be another way to break the curse."

She raised her hands helplessly. "If there is, I haven't found it. I've searched nearly every book in the library that I could find."

"I'll help you."

"Why?" Her brain was beginning to feel sluggish, but even in her tired state, Holly knew that there was no reason why Dominic should volunteer to spend his time in an abandoned castle looking for a way to break her curse. "It's better for you this way, isn't it? You have a castle full of treasure at your disposal and no one to stand in your way."

He scoffed. "I realize that I didn't exactly make the best first impression, but you have to believe that I would never value *things* over a person."

"I don't know that a king's wealth qualifies as simply 'things.'"

"It's still not as important as a human soul."

Holly stopped, the movement so sudden that Dominic took several steps before he realized that she was no longer walking beside him. He turned to look for her.

“Why?” she repeated. “What do you gain by doing this?”

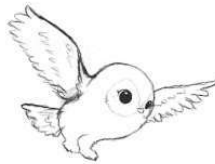
“Other than hopefully the return of the rightful king to Weihnacht? Nothing.” He shrugged, the movement making the silver in his pack jingle. “But you’re not alone, Your Highness. Not anymore. If there’s a way to break this curse, we’ll find it.”

She laughed mirthlessly as she continued walking, compelled by the overwhelming urge to sleep. “It would take a miracle.”

“Well then, it’s a good thing Deus Natus Day is just around the corner. I hear that it’s the perfect time of year for miracles.”

Chapter Nine

*A wink of his eye and a twist of his head,
Soon gave me to know I had nothing to dread*



Midnight couldn't come soon enough.

"You seem abnormally restless tonight," Myran commented as Dominic examined the contents of his bag and rechecked the harnesses on the sled for the third time that hour. The large man leaned against the door of a stall where a very pregnant cow was almost ready to give birth. "I don't think anything in that sack has jumped out of its own accord. What has you worried?"

Dominic laughed self-consciously. "I'm not worried."

"Then what is it? I thought, from the smile on your face last night, that your trip to the old castle was successful."

Dominic raised an eyebrow. "When did you see me? I thought you had gone home for the night."

"I was on my way in while you were on your way out. Bessie here has been ready to calve any day now for the last week and I was coming to check on her. It's her first, you know."

"Ah, I see. It was successful. And...informative."

Myran folded his arms over his chest, making them appear even more massive than they already were. "Explain."

Dominic hesitated, looking out the barn window at the approaching nightfall.

"You have time," his friend argued. "What's the rush? Even if you had to drive the sled to the other side of the town, most people wouldn't be asleep yet."

The mention of sleep brought Holly's face front and center in his mind. He could vividly picture her dark, curly tresses as they tumbled down and around her shoulders and her chocolate brown eyes, bright with intelligence and wit. But it was her brave smile as she explained her curse and the tight, almost desperate grip of her hand as she bid him goodbye the night before that were emblazoned most in his memory.

"Aha! I know that look!"

He shook the thoughts of Holly away. "What look?"

"The face you make when you're thinking of a pretty girl."

Dominic gave him a flat look. "I don't have a face."

"You do." Myran nodded solemnly. "I've seen it before."

"When?"

"You were ten. One of Lizzie's friend's allowed you to escort them to dinner, and you were walking on clouds for nearly a week."

Dominic punched Myran lightly in the arm. "I was not."

"You were. And you had the same expression on your face just now. Did you finally hear from Joy?"

A sigh escaped him. "Yes."

"And? Did she agree to meet with you?"

"No. She said her condition makes her unable to leave her home, but that she still wants to continue our correspondence and remain friends."

Myran's eyebrows rose to nearly his hairline. "I don't understand. Why the dreamy look just now? What happened last night?"

Dominic pretended to once again be very interested in the contents of his bag. "You seem very invested in this aspect of my personal life."

His friend threw up his hands. "You're my best friend, Nic. For the last year I've watched as you fall head over heels for this mystery girl who you've never met except through letters. Then, after you write to her *finally* asking for a meeting in person, you suddenly come home with an extra spring in your step and the face of a man who has met his future wife. Forgive me for assuming that perhaps your lady love agreed to your request to meet."

"Joy and I are just friends. She's not my anything."

Yet.

Myran gave him a pointed look.

"Besides, it wasn't her that I was thinking about earlier." Though Dominic couldn't deny the fact that when picturing Joy opening her letters, it was Holly's face she wore.

It's only because I've never seen her, and my mind is just trying to add a face to the name.

"Wait, there's someone else?" Myran closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "When did this happen?"

"There's not someone else. Heavens, Ron! Why do you automatically assume that I am romantically attracted to every woman I meet?"

"So it is a woman."

"Ron!"

"Who is she?"

Dominic groaned and scrubbed his hands down his face. He had purposefully avoided mentioning Holly to anyone, knowing that his story was unbelievable. "The princess."

"I'm sorry—what?"

"The castle isn't as empty as everyone believes. When I got inside last night, I found a whole room full of bodies."

Myran's face paled.

"They were just sleeping," Dominic was quick to reassure him. "Though I didn't know that at first. I just shut the door as fast as I could and went on my way. The castle looks as if it was just frozen in time; everything is still there. I decided that something small like silverware or table settings would be easiest to carry away and raise the least amount of suspicion."

"I found the formal dining room on the lower level and was filling my bag when a woman appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. She was pale, as if she hadn't seen

the sun in quite a while, and disturbingly thin. And there was an owl on her shoulder.”

“An owl?” Myran narrowed his eyes thoughtfully.

“Yes. I will admit, my immediate thought was that all the stories about the castle being haunted were true and that I was seeing a ghost. But she was just so...odd, that I decided she had to be real, no matter how inconceivable it was.”

“What do you mean?”

“The way she wouldn’t stop staring at my face, as if she had never seen another person before. And then she talked a mile a minute about the absolute strangest things—potatoes and owls and parliament—”

“Not surprising. A group of owls is called a parliament.”

Dominic shook his head in disbelief. “Why does this seem to be common knowledge that I alone am unaware of?”

“Cracks in your education, I suppose.” Myran waved a hand for him to continue. “Carry on. So the beautiful woman had an owl and talked about potatoes.”

“I never said she was beautiful.”

“You didn’t have to. Poor Joy.” Myran shook his head sadly.

“Holly might be conventionally attractive, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to forget about Joy.” Dominic stuck his chin out stubbornly. “She and I have a history; she knows things about me that not even you do.”

“Such as?”

“There’s a reason I haven’t told you.”

His friend gave him an incredulous look. “I’m hurt.”

“You’ll survive somehow, I’m sure. Anyway, Holly explained everything to me. There was a vengeful Fairy at her christening who cursed her to prick her finger and die before she turned sixteen, but her Fairy godmother was able to alter the spell so that she would only fall asleep.”

Myran stroked his chin thoughtfully. “It’s been a hundred years. How is she still alive?”

“She’s only awake for a few hours every night, but the rest of the time is sleeping just like the others.”

“I thought you said only the princess was cursed.”

“That’s what Holly said, too. But it seems like when she fell asleep, the whole castle did as well.”

“And you’re sure she’s really the princess? You got into the castle; what’s to stop some other vagrant or dastardly criminal from getting inside?”

Dominic shook his head. “I looked in the portrait gallery this morning. Holly looks exactly like Queen Briar, only with dark hair. Besides, she’s so thin and underfed that there’s no way she would have the strength to climb the walls.”

Myran was silent for a few moments. Dominic let out a long, slow breath. He felt better for having told his story. Myran was smart, and it was likely that he would see some angle that Dominic had missed.

“You’re going to try to find a way to break the curse?” Though the words were a question, his friend stated them more as a matter of fact.

“I have to.”

“You don’t, but you’re going to. Because that’s who you are, Nic—always looking out for those who need it. Does Holly have any ideas about how to break it? Surely her godmother would have told her something.”

Dominic shifted uncomfortably. “Her godmother said the curse would be broken in a hundred years by the son of a king.”

“Strange wording. Why not just say a prince?” Myran pressed his lips together in thought. “I’m guessing the son of a duke doesn’t count?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Better get started on some letters, then. What happens when the hundred years are up?”

Dominic started pacing the short distance between themselves and the door. “I don’t know; neither does she. But the hundred years is up this Deus Natus, and that’s only a week away. Even if I did write letters to the neighboring kingdoms, it’s highly unlikely that we could get a prince here and in the castle before then.”

“What are you going to do?”

“At this point? Scour the records at the castle for anything Holly might have missed and pray for a Deus Natus miracle.”

“You should ask Joy for help.”

Myran’s suggestion made Dominic pause. “Oh?”

His friend shrugged, pushing off from the stall door. “She seems intelligent, and if she’s stuck at home all day, I’m sure she would appreciate something new to fill her time.”

“Good idea. I’ll write her a letter tomorrow.” Dominic checked the window, satisfied at the level of darkness outside. He whistled for the dogs, who came bounding up at once, eager for a run.

“Are you making more deliveries tonight?” Myran knelt and began to buckle Blitz and Donnie into their harnesses.

Dominic nodded, doing the same for Prince and Vivian. “Frank Jakobs was injured in the mines last week, and it looks like he’ll be out of work for at least the next few weeks. His oldest daughter found a job, but she won’t be able to bring in enough by herself to cover Frank’s salary. And Mrs. Pekel has her husband’s creditors at her door, demanding either payment or her daughters.” He moved on to Dash and Dancer. “I’ll head back to the castle when I’m done. Holly said she wakes up around midnight.”

He rose, brushing his hands off on his trousers before pulling on his knit cap. Myran handed him his leather gloves and mittens. He studied Dominic’s face for a moment, his own twisted with concern.

“What is it?” Dominic pulled the thick leather over his hands.

“What if there’s no way to help her? What if Deus Natus comes and the curse isn’t broken.”

Dominic exhaled slowly, the somber thought tugging at his sympathetic heart. “Then at least her last hours weren’t spent completely alone.”



Shortly after midnight, Dominic careful dropped down the castle chimney. His errands had taken him longer than he had planned, as the youngest Jakobs boys were restless and nearly caught him. He had been forced to hide himself in the pantry for almost a quarter of an hour while their mother cajoled them back into bed, and the chapel bells were already tolling the midnight hour as he was entering the park.

“You came back.” Holly’s voice was full of surprise as he backed awkwardly out of the hearth, ducking under the hanging stockings and taking care not to crush his

bag. Dominic turned around to find her sitting at the desk near the window, watching him with wide eyes. Who sat on the windowsill, staring at him with the same intensity as the owl in the letter tree.

I can't seem to get away from them. I'm beginning to wonder if Weihnacht is experiencing some sort of owl overpopulation.

Holly hastily shoved a pile of papers into a drawer, pulling his attention away from the bird.

"Of course I came back. I said I would, didn't I?"

She twisted the ends of her hair, which had been pulled back into a loose braid. "Right. Of course. I brought up some more silver from the kitchen to save you the trip." She gestured to one of the end tables where a silver tea service and a pile of assorted utensils lay. "And there should be some candlesticks in the guest rooms. I'm assuming you're wanting pieces that will be fairly inconspicuous to sell or melt down?"

Dominic simply stared at her for a moment as he processed her words.

She thinks I'm just here to take more valuables. Obviously my first impression was worse than I thought.

He cleared his throat. "Thank you, Your Highness. That's very thoughtful of you."

Holly gave him a small smile. "You can just call me Holly. There's really no reason to pay attention to formalities, given the situation."

"Thank you, Holly," he amended, testing out the name on his tongue. "As I said, it was a thoughtful gesture, but I didn't come here to plunder your home."

Her forehead wrinkled. "You didn't?"

"No. I came to try to help you find a solution to the curse, remember?"

She nodded slowly, her eyes narrowing as if she were trying to put together a puzzle in her mind. "Yes, though it's all very fuzzy. Sometimes it's hard to remember what happened when the curse is trying to put me to bed."

Dominic chuckled at the metaphor, recalling the scene he had watched play out earlier at the Jakobs' residence. "You make it sound like an exasperated mother."

Her expression cleared and Holly favored him with a real smile. "Sometimes it feels that way. I used to fight it—sleeping—as long as I could, but in the end it's easier to just go to bed when it tells me."

She stood and moved gracefully across the room to the door. "I won't lie and say that I believe we'll be successful, but if you're looking for a way to break the curse, the library is the place to start. The most recent records are there, as well as all of the books I could find on Fairy magic." Who flew across the room and landed in her customary place on the princess's shoulder.

Dominic followed as Holly led him down the long hallway, navigating by the cold moonlight alone. She moved silently in front of him and so smoothly that it seemed almost as if she were simply floating along across the floor. The movement, combined with the effect of her light-colored nightgown, gave him reason to understand how the rumors of the castle being haunted came to be.

Holly turned a corner and followed another corridor. Two heavy, wooden doors stood at the end, and they swung inward on creaky hinges as the princess opened them with a shove. Tall windows along the back wall let in the moonlight, casting shadows on the floor and leaving the corners and narrow aisles between the tall bookshelves in darkness.

Dominic stepped into the cold room after her. She stepped to the side, and the sound of a match striking preceded the warm, dancing light of an oil lamp. Holly handed one to him, then lit a second for herself.

He held the lamp high and turned around in a slow circle, taking in what he could of the massive room. The walls were completely covered in books from floor to ceiling, with rolling ladders secured onto tracks for each side of the room. There was a large fireplace on one side of the room, and several plush, comfortable-looking chairs set before it. A square table stood on the other side, its surface completely covered in piles of paper, maps, and open ledgers. Bookshelves filled nearly every other inch of available space in the room. The owl flew across the room, perching on the edge of one the tallest shelves.

"Wow," Dominic sighed in wonder. "This room is incredible."

Holly's lips turned up in a fond smile as she joined him in examining the room. "It's always been one of my favorite rooms." She motioned for him to follow as she walked over to the table and began clearing off a corner. "We can sit here. I'll bring over everything that I've found so far."

Dominic reached her just as she was turning to venture into the shelves. "Wait," he said, gently grabbing her arm. His fingers easily encircled it, and his heart gave a lurch at just how small and underfed she was.

The princess looked in surprise from his hand up to his face. This close, he could see the tiny flecks of gold in her eyes, adding depth to their rich chocolate color.

He dropped his hand and took a tiny step back, moving his bag from his shoulder to the floor. "I brought you something." He pulled out a parcel wrapped in brown paper, and immediately the smell of sugar and rich molasses filled the air between them.

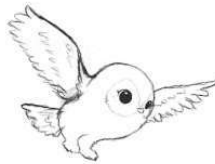
Holly's hand flew up to her mouth as she gasped. "What is *that*?"

"Something more valuable than all the treasure in this castle: molasses cookies." Dominic held them out to her with a wink that caused an adorable blush to creep up Holly's face. He grinned. "My friend Myran's mother makes them, and they're my absolute favorite. I just...well, I noticed that you only ate that potato last night, and I thought that maybe it's been a while since you've had real food and so I brought —"

His words were cut off as Holly threw her arms around his neck and sobbed into his shoulder.

Chapter Ten

*He spoke not a word, but went straight to his work,
And filled all the stockings; then turned with a jerk*



The curse could take her now.

Holly leaned back in her chair with her eyes closed and savored the sweet, nutty, and slightly bitter flavor of the soft cookies. The cookie dough had been rolled in sugar before baking, giving the crackled outer layer just a little bit of crunchy texture. Holly could not remember the last time she had ever eaten anything as delicious.

“Well, this is going to be a problem,” she announced, straightening and opening her eyes.

Dominic looked up from the book he was studying. “What is?”

“You’ve ruined me for potatoes. How am I supposed to go back to tubers after this? And there’s definitely no way I’m going to be content with kale. I didn’t even like it before.” She licked her fingers clean of every last speck of sugar, caring little about her manners.

“You have kale? But how? Do you grow it here?”

“Parliament brings it to me. Kale and potatoes, which is pretty much all they can find fresh that people won’t be too concerned about if a little goes missing. I hate the fact that they have to steal it, of course, but I don’t know what else to do. The food in the pantry ran out decades ago.” Holly nervously twisted and untwisted the end of her braid around her finger.

“I’m sure if they knew it was for you, they would be more than happy to help.” Dominic gave her a reassuring smile. His face was cleaner than the previous night, and she could see a faint dusting of freckles over his nose. Holly idly wondered what his hair looked like under his black knit hat—some shade of blonde, she guessed, by the light, honey-brown color of his eyebrows.

Thankfully, he had taken her hysterical sobs in stride earlier and hadn’t been frightened away. Instead, he had merely stood and patted her back until she was composed enough to direct him to the books she wanted while she sat down and unwrapped the tiny circles of heaven he had brought with him.

“Holly?”

She blinked. "Yes?"

"I was just asking how your owls got their names. Are you alright?"

Her cheeks burned with embarrassment. "I'm fine. I was just lost in thought for a moment. I'm not used to carrying on two-sided conversations." Her laugh was brittle and forced, and tears sprang unbidden to her eyes.

"It's fine." Dominic's hand was warm and comforting as he slid it over hers. "I can imagine that it's quite an adjustment after spending so much time alone."

Holly nodded and swallowed against the lump in her throat. With a hoot, Who flew down and landed on her shoulder, rubbing her soft, feathered head against Holly's cheek. She leaned into the show of affection.

"So, the names?"

"Who was the first one." Holly stroked the back of her finger up and down Who's belly. "She was just an owlet when she showed up in the holly hedge outside the kitchen window. Her wing was broken, and she was scratched and bleeding as if she had been in a fight. After I had taken her in and patched her up, I asked her what her name was and she answered immediately with a hoot, as if she really understood the question."

Who nipped at her ear.

"Yes, yes, I know you do," Holly reassured her in a low, soothing voice. "I thought it was hilarious, of course—an owl named Who. She stayed with me for a few months until she healed, and then the next winter she returned with her mate, who I named What to stick with the pattern. Where, When, and Why are their children. How is a recent addition; she just showed up one evening with the rest of Parliament and stuck around."

Dominic leaned forward and rested his chin on his hand. "How is the brown one?"

Holly nodded. "I refer to them as Parliament because it amuses me." She added an overexaggerated posh accent to her voice. "I meet with Parliament every evening for dinner, and we discuss the state of the kingdom."

The young man across from her chuckled, and Holly was distracted for a moment by the mirth in his eyes and the way his whole face reflected his smile. Her chest fluttered with warmth. "Anyway," she added in her normal voice, "you probably think I'm quite strange, talking to owls and inviting them into the house."

"Not at all." Dominic's voice was warm. "I think it's quite normal to look for someone or something to talk to, especially when you're all by yourself. I don't live alone, and I talk to my dog often."

"You have a dog?"

"Technically, I have eight, though Dash is the only one who is allowed in the house. They're bred and trained as sled dogs."

"Dash?" The name jostled something in her memory, but Holly couldn't place where she had heard it before. "That's such a cute name. He must be fast?"

"Not quite as fast anymore as he was when he was a pup, but yes. When he runs full out, he's little more than a streak of white fur." Dominic's face lit up as he spoke, and Holly found herself mesmerized by the sight. She had seen handsome faces over the years—there were portraits in the gallery and dozens of other paintings hanging in the castle—but oil and canvas could not come close to the real thing.

"He sounds adorable."

"When all of this is over, I'll introduce you."

Dominic's words were like a bucket of cold water poured over Holly's head. She sighed quietly. "I'm still not convinced that anything else can be done. But I

appreciate you taking the time to look.”

Dominic turned back to his book and Holly pulled one of the heavy tomes towards her, flipping through the chapters on Fairy magic until she came to the chapter on curses that she had already read more times than she could count. Silence fell over the library, but, for the first time in a hundred years, it wasn't lonely.



“There has to be something else, something we're overlooking.” Dominic pulled a frustrated hand through his straw-blond hair, causing it to stand up straight. For three nights in a row they had pored over every book in the library that they could find about magic or Fairies, and, for three nights in a row, their search had proved fruitless.

Holly was curled on one of the chairs in the library in front of a roaring fire. Dominic had surprised her with a cord of firewood, and she intended to relish every moment of warmth that she could. She closed her eyes and soaked in the heat like one of the lizards she had read about in the large encyclopedia. “It's alright, Dominic. I told you before: I don't think there is another way. Lily would have told me if there was.”

“What if Lily didn't know?”

She cracked one eye open. “I think she would know her own spells.”

Dominic threw himself unceremoniously into the chair beside her. “Maybe. But magic isn't completely tame. What if there was some counter curse that she didn't know about? True love's kiss, or something like that.”

Both of Holly's eyes were open now. “I don't have a true love, so that wouldn't work anyway. It's rather hard to form attachments when you're confined to your home.”

A distant look passed over his eyes. “I suppose you're right.”

“Besides,” Holly continued, “I don't know that Weihnacht even wants to have a king again. I'm sure the regent isn't eager to hand over his authority.”

A bark of laughter escaped Dominic. He rested his hands on the arms of the chair and stared into the fire. “The regent would be more than happy to pass on the responsibility.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because the regent is my father.” Dominic turned his head slowly and met her eyes. He wore an expression of tired defeat. “The duke of Rodel would like nothing more than to be able to hand over the reins, and his heir is even more eager.”

“Why?” Holly's interest was piqued. “As the regent, your father is practically the king. Why would he want to give up all that power? Isn't power what most leaders want?”

“Because power in this case comes with a great deal of responsibility. The kingdom is dying, and everyone looks to my father for the solution, as if he can somehow put a stop to the long winters or magically come up with a way to feed everyone.” He scrubbed his hands over his face. “We've managed to make some improvement by using greenhouses—”

Holly's heart stuttered. “Greenhouses?”

"Small buildings with glass ceilings and walls," Dominic explained, misunderstanding her question. "Though we've had some success with walls that are partially made of stone on the lower half, which makes them a little more economical to build. I heard about them through a friend of mine."

Her hands suddenly went numb, and Holly's head felt as if she were swimming through murky water.

All of Rodel has been building greenhouses. It doesn't necessarily mean anything. But what if...?

"Holly? Are you okay?"

She blinked quickly and forced a bright smile to her face. "Of course. Just a little light-headed for a moment there. I must just not be used to being so warm."

Dominic's blue eyes darkened with concern. "Do you need to move away from the fire?"

"No!" she answered a little too quickly. She cleared her throat. "It's been a long time since I've been this warm. Don't take it away from me."

His concern turned into a smile at that. "As you wish, Your Highness."

Holly swatted at his arm. "None of that. But speaking of the fire, thank you again for bringing the wood."

"It was no trouble at all. I selfishly didn't want to spend another night in a cold library. I don't know how you do it every night."

She shrugged. "You get used to it after a while."

"I wish you didn't have to." Dominic leaned forward onto his knees and steepled his hands under his chin. "There has to be something we're missing."

"There's not. It's a king's son or nothing at all. Wait!" Holly's spine straightened as an idea coursed through her mind. "If you're the regent's son, doesn't that mean that you have some connection to the ruling families of other kingdoms?"

"I've already written, but with the roads the way they are this time of year, I don't know that we'll even hear back from them before Deus Natus, let alone expecting them to send princes all this way. And that's if they even take us seriously. Trying to explain that the princess of Weihnacht is asleep in an enchanted castle but awake for a few hours every night, and ready and willing to receive princes, is a bit of a hard sell."

Holly deflated. "I suppose, when you put it like that. Thank you for writing, all the same."

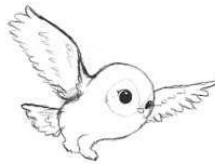
"I meant it when I said I would help you, Holly. I'll keep working on it. There are still a couple of brains that I have yet to pick."

"Deus Natus is in three days, Dominic."

"Then I suppose I better get back to work."

Chapter Eleven

*And laying a finger aside of his nose,
And giving a nod, up the chimney he rose*



The words on the page in front of her blurred together. Her skin alternated between ice and fire, and she could hear her heart pounding in her ears.

It was him.

Joy,

I have a bit of an odd request to ask of you. You've mentioned before that, because of your condition, you spend a lot of time reading, and also that you love solving puzzles.

I've recently met someone (I didn't ask if I could share her name, so I'll just refer to her as my friend) who is under a Fairy curse. Her Fairy godmother was unable to remove it herself, though she did modify it to make it less severe. She said that the curse could be broken in a hundred years by a king's son, but as we are nearing the deadline of the curse with no princes in sight, I am desperately hoping that perhaps there is another solution that we just haven't thought of yet.

Would you be willing to help me research? Your mind is the most brilliant one I know, and if anyone could find the answer, I know it's you.

Let me know if you come up with anything. The deadline is Deus Natus Day, and if the curse isn't broken, I'm afraid my friend will never wake up again.

Nic

Holly sank slowly into her desk chair, clutching the letter tightly in her trembling hands. "I should have seen it before. Dominic. Nic. The passion for the people of Rodel, his willingness to drop everything and help me, the *greenhouses*." She smacked a palm into her forehead. "And Dash! Nic's dog is named Dash, though I didn't recognize it out loud at first." She narrowed her eyes at the owl. "You knew, didn't you? You've seen him leaving letters in the tree; that's why you didn't act more suspicious of him when he came into the house. I wish you would have said something."

She sighed and buried her face in her hands. "This is awful, Who. He's even better in person than I could have ever dreamed of."

Who hopped over and hooted softly, nudging Holly's hands with her beak.

Her hands fell to her lap. "It's awful because he can't break the curse." She inhaled shakily, blinking back tears. "He can't break the curse, but he's the only one that I would ever want to. I thought I was half in love with him before when he was just a voice in my head and words on paper. But now? Now I've seen the kindness in his eyes and heard the laughter in his voice and watched the way he tirelessly throws himself into taking care of everyone he meets...now I know I'm in love. But I'm just going to lose him forever, either from the curse or some foreign prince."

A tear escaped and ran down her cheek, but Holly made no move to dash it away. Her heart ached, and the silence of the castle walls pressed in around her.

"There's only one thing we can do, Who. We have to let him go."



She could tell the next night that Dominic had received her letter. There was a tension in his jaw that had never been there before, and his eyes would occasionally mist over with hurt before turning dark and hard. Holly's heart ached at the thought that she was the one causing him pain, but it had to be done. She couldn't have him mourning her loss for the rest of his life after she was gone. Dominic felt deeply, and his loyalties were strong. Losing not just one, but two of his friends in short succession would break him.

Who had hissed and snapped at her as she penned her letter the night before.

"It's not the same, Who. This way, he has no reason to worry about Joy, or worse, waste his time looking for her. He'll be upset for a while, but making him mad is better than leaving him feeling abandoned."

Or so she kept repeating to herself.



Nic,

I'm so sorry, but I cannot help you.

In fact, I'm afraid that I can't continue writing to you at all. I thought that perhaps it would be better to stay friends, but I see now that it would be a mistake. My condition will never be cured, and I doubt very much that your future wife would be pleased to know that you're writing to some strange girl.

I wish you all the best in your future endeavors. Your friendship has meant more to me than you know.

Don't bother to write back. I won't be answering.

All my love,

Joy



Dominic slammed his book shut and jumped to his feet with a frustrated growl. "Useless! It's all useless! Fourteen books on Fairy magic and not a single one of them can tell us how to break a curse."

Holly fingered the letter in her pocket. "I already told you, Dominic: there's nothing you can do. If there's not a prince, the curse won't break."

"So what? You're just going to...give up?" His voice was growing louder, his eyes bright with hurt and unshed tears. He pulled at his hair with both hands as he paced across the library. "Why does everyone insist on just giving up?"

"I'm not giving up. I'm just accepting the way things are. The hundred years are up tomorrow night. I'm either going to sleep forever or be dead. Either way, there's nothing I can do, and there's no use getting worked up over it."

"No!" He was shouting now. "I refuse to accept that."

Holly's voice was quiet and sad. "It's not really up to you."

"Don't you care, Holly? Don't you care at all? What about Rodel? What about Who and the rest of Parliament? What about me?"

Dominic's voice broke, and so did his hold over his tears. Grief and regret knifed through Holly's heart, and it was all she could do not to blurt everything out to him. She wrapped her arms around her middle, needing something to hold onto, but knowing that if she held onto him, she would never let go.

"Rodel will be just the same as it has been." Somehow she was able to keep her voice strong. "They didn't know I existed before, and they won't notice when I'm gone. As for the owls, Who is smart. She knows what's happening and she'll take care of the others."

"And me?" His voice was so small, like a lost child.

"You'll be just fine. You'll go on with your life and become the next regent. Weihnacht will be in good hands, and in ten years you'll look back and be sure that all of this was all just a dream."

"That's not true."

"It is, and it's alright. I'm thankful for everything you've done for me, Dominic, but I think it's time for you to go. Here." Holly's voice wavered slightly as she held out a book on greenhouse gardening. "Take this. I'm sure there's something useful in there, and you can think of me when I'm gone." She swallowed against the pain in her throat, and after he took the book from her, she replaced her arms at her sides and squeezed her hands into fists.

Dominic's eyes were wide and wild. He looked from the book to her face "You can't be serious!"

"I am. There's nothing else for you to do now. Go and enjoy the holiday with your family." Holly's eyes burned.

His mouth opened, closed, and opened again, but no words came out. Finally, he set his jaw with a hard glint to his eyes. "Fine," he spit the word out, his voice tight and restrained. "If that's the way you want it, Your Highness."

Her nails dug into her palms. "It is."

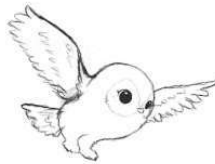
"Very well." Dominic pressed his lips together and spun on his heel, heading for the library door. It slammed shut behind him.

Holly waited a few moments before silently following after him, her heart demanding that she see him leave. She peeked through the door to her sitting room just in time to see him swipe angrily at his nose before working his jaw back and forth. He gave one last look over his shoulder, holding her gaze for a long moment, then resolutely turned to the hearth and climbed up the chimney without another word.

The sound of his ascent faded away into nothing as Holly's heart cracked into a million pieces and she fell on her knees to the floor, silent and numb.

Chapter Twelve

*He sprang to his sleigh, to his team gave a whistle,
And away they all flew like the down on a thistle*



"I've seen rotten apples sweeter than you today." Myran's large form loomed in the door of the supply closet in the barn that he had taken refuge in that afternoon. Dash lay across his lap, with his nose resting on his front paws and his big brown eyes watching him sadly. Dominic's hand was buried in the thick, soft fur at the base of Dash's neck.

"What do you want?" Dominic didn't even bother looking up. His free hand picked up a piece of straw and flicked it back to the floor.

"Your sister sent me."

"Of course she did." He rolled his eyes. He was being petulant, but he didn't care. "What does *Lizzie* want then?"

Myran lowered himself to the floor beside him with a grunt. He had to draw his knees in close to his chest to fit his large frame into the narrow space. "She's worried about you."

"Why? Because I said I didn't want to participate in her silly party?"

"Precisely. You love Deus Natus more than anyone else in your family, and you've never missed one of her parties."

"I'm allowed to change my tastes. People do it all the time."

"But usually not overnight." Myran looked at him pointedly. "What happened?"

"She told me to leave her alone."

"Which 'she' are we talking about?"

Dominic didn't bother to answer, taking out his bitter frustrations on the straw.

"I see." Myran was silent for a moment. "So what are you going to do about it?"

"Exactly what they want me to do, which is nothing." Dominic rose and brushed the straw off his legs. "I know you're trying to help, Ron, but just leave it be. Joy obviously doesn't feel the same way about me as I do her, and Holly would rather just give up and die than fight. There's nothing to do here. Have a happy Deus Natus."

He stepped over Myran's legs, snapping for Dash to follow, and started back towards his house. He might have been able to hide away for the afternoon, but

there was no way his parents were going to let him get out of the midnight service, despite the torturous turmoil his heart was experiencing.

“I know you’re hurting, Nic,” Myran’s voice called after him. “But if there’s any day to choose love and forgiveness, it’s Deus Natus. She’s probably scared and pushing you away to keep you from getting hurt. It’s up to you to decide if you’re really going to let her be alone. Remember, you’re the one who promised her a Deus Natus miracle.”

Dominic raised a hand to show he had heard, though he stubbornly steeled his heart against the words.

A Deus Natus miracle? Ha. I’m starting to doubt such a thing even exists.



He went through the motions of the Deus Natus Eve service without feeling any of the joy and excitement that had always accompanied him before. The songs were dull, the words delivered by rote, and even the streetlights sparkling on the newly fallen snow failed to elicit any type of response. He kissed his mother and sister on the cheek as soon as they arrived home, then closeted himself away in his room.

The clock downstairs chimed half-past one. It was strange to be in his own room at that time of night, and Dominic loosened the cravat at his neck and threw himself across his bed. He stared up at the ceiling for a moment before turning his head, catching sight of the book on his pillow. It was the one about greenhouses that Holly had handed him when she dismissed him the night before.

With a sigh, he reached over and picked it up, running his fingers over the spine. He thumbed through the pages, startling as a piece of paper fluttered to his chest. Dominic picked up the paper, then stilled as he caught sight of the handwriting.

He set the book to the side and slowly sat up, his brain struggling to comprehend the letter in front of him.

Joy,

I’ll be honest with you: things are not great. One long winter would make things hard on the farmers, but they would be able to recover. Even two might make for some tight times, but a few good harvests would set things right again.

*But it’s been **years** of long winters. They’re lasting longer and starting earlier every year, which means not enough grain for the animals and not enough grain for the people. I wish I knew about some way that we could keep growing **something** though the winter. Even just a crop of vegetables would be better than the nothing we have right now.*

Do you have any ideas in that bookish brain of yours? Maybe one of your stories will provide us with our magical solution.

Nic

The paper fell to his lap as Dominic stared at the floor in front of him. He remembered that letter. It was the one he had written to Joy before she sent him her ideas and plans for building greenhouses—the plans that had helped save the people of Rodel from starvation that winter. But how had his letter to Joy ended up in Holly’s book?

His mind spun as the pieces fell into place.

Holly was under a curse that allowed her to be awake only a few hours at a time.

Joy suffered from an incurable condition and was confined to her bed most of the time.

Holly was trapped in a castle barricaded by holly hedges.

Joy couldn't leave her house.

Holly had a whole parliament of owls that brought her food every evening.

The tree where Joy left her letters was always guarded by an owl.

Holly was Joy.

Joy was Princess Holly.

Dominic's heart turned to ice as the full reality of the situation hit him. He took one look at the clock, whistled for Dash, and sprinted down the hall.

"Myran!" he yelled as he burst through the barn doors. "I need—"

"The sled?" Myran gestured to the dog sled, where all the dogs but Dash were already harnessed and ready to go. "I thought you might."

Dominic knelt and attempted to fasten Dash's buckle, but his trembling fingers were unwilling to cooperate. Myran gently nudged him aside.

He ran his hands anxiously through his hair. He had run out without his hat, but there was no time to go back and get it. "How did you know?"

"I know you. Once you realized that both your ladies were one and the same, you wouldn't waste any time in trying to set things right."

"You knew?"

"It was pretty simple, really. How many young ladies do you know who have a pet owl? And neither of them could leave their house. I'm honestly a little disappointed it took you this long." Myran stood and moved to the side.

"To tell you the truth, so am I," Dominic admitted as he jumped on the back of the sled. "And I hope I'm not too late."

He whistled shrilly, and the dogs bounded forward, running at top speed towards the castle.

Please, Deus. Don't let it be too late.



The castle was always silent, but there was a heaviness to the air, a finality that hung over his head as Dominic crawled out of the chimney. His heart pounded in his chest with fear and dread. It was close to the time that Holly always went back to sleep. What if he was too late?

He glanced quickly around the sitting room, confirming that she wasn't there. He hesitated, unsure whether he should check the kitchen, when an owl alighted on his shoulder with a rustling of feathers. Dominic turned. It was the brown owl, How.

"Can you show me where she is? Please?" He didn't care that he was begging a bird. At this point, he would beg the walls themselves if they would only help him get to Holly before it was too late.

The owl flew through the interior door and Dominic followed, stepping past the sleeping bodies without so much as a second thought. How led him up several long, spiraled flights of steps until he came to a room in the top of a tower. He pushed on the door, which swung open with a creak.

His heart stopped at the sight that met his eyes. A small, modest bed stood in the middle of the room, with the princess stretched out on it, illuminated by a beam of moonlight. Her dark curls were splayed around her face, emphasizing her pale skin

and rosy pink lips. Long eyelashes rested on the top of her cheeks. A worn blanket with fraying edges had been pulled up to her chest and her thin hands lay folded atop it.

She looked like a body laid out for a funeral.

Dominic gripped the doorframe behind him to keep himself from falling to the floor as his knees nearly gave out. A strangled cry of grief and pain escaped his lips.

How long he stood there, staring, he wasn't sure. But suddenly there was the tiniest movement, a shifting of fabric as Holly stirred on the bed. She turned her head slightly and cracked open her eyes.

"Dominic?" Her voice was groggy and heavy with sleep.

He was on his knees beside her bed in less than a heartbeat. "Holly!"

"You're here." Her eyes closed again.

"I'm here," he confirmed. "You can't get rid of me that easily. I'm sorry I left."

"It's alright; I told you to."

"And I should never have listened. I promised you a Deus Natus miracle, Holly Joy."

Her eyelids fluttered open. "You figured it out."

"I should have a lot sooner."

"I just didn't want you to get hurt." Holly blinked several times, fighting hard to stay awake. "I want you to promise me something."

Dominic grabbed for her hands. "Anything, love."

"I want you to promise me that after I'm gone, you'll find someone to share your life with. I don't want you to be alone."

"Anything but that."

"Please, Nic." Her words were barely a whisper now. "I love you. I don't want you to be alone."

"I love you, Holly." Tears streamed down his face. "I knew from the third letter that you were it for me. I love you, and I'm going to do everything in my power to break this. I don't care if it means bringing in a parade of princes and watching them fall in love with your mind and your heart and your beauty. I don't care if you have to marry them, even though I will spend every moment of it wishing that it was me. I would ask you to marry me, if I could."

"And I...would say...yes." Holly exhaled the final word. Her eyes closed and her body relaxed into the stillness of sleep.

Dominic choked back a sob as he let his head fall to the edge of the bed. He took a few shuddering breaths before bringing Holly's hand to his lips. He rose and rearranged her blankets, keeping his fingers wrapped around hers, reluctant to let go. He brushed the tears from her cheeks and pressed a fervent kiss to her forehead.

"I'll fix this, Holly," he whispered past the sharp aching of his heart. "I promise."

He turned away from the bed, releasing her hand.

Before he had gone more than a step, someone grabbed his hand. His head whipped around.

Small, pale fingers were wrapped around his wrist. His eyes slowly moved from the hand up the arm and shoulders and finally to Holly's face. She was looking at him with wide, disbelieving, *awake* eyes.

"Am I dreaming?" She blinked. "This feels a little bit like a dream."

"Holly?" Dominic's heart and mind were haywire, struggling to keep up with the rapid change of events.

Holly shook her head, speaking softly to herself. "No. This isn't a dream."

"It's not?" For his part, Dominic still wasn't entirely sure.

"No. If it were a real dream, you would have kissed me by now."

All intelligent thought left his brain, and the next thing Dominic knew, he was at Holly's side, kissing her with all of the joy and passionate relief that was beginning to swell in his heart.

He pulled back, touching their foreheads together. Holly's arms were around his neck. "This is a problem," she said.

"Why?" He sat back on his heels and searched her face. Holly's cheeks were pink, and her eyes danced with a happy, teasing light.

"Well, now I still don't know if it's a dream or not."

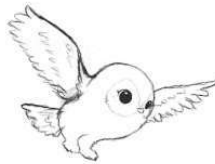
"It's not."

"Are you sure? I might need you to kiss me again, just to make sure."

Dominic was more than happy to comply.

Chapter Thirteen

*But I heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight,
"Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night!"*



"I don't understand," Holly said a few moments later, resting her head on Dominic's shoulder. He sat beside her on the narrow bed, and she basked in the glorious feeling of being held. She didn't think she would ever take a hug for granted again. "I thought you weren't a prince."

"I'm not."

"Then how was the curse broken?"

A shimmer of purple magic caught her eye, and Holly watched in wonder as How transformed into a plump, gray-haired Fairy with bright eyes and a ready smile. "You silly, darling girl," Lily said with a shake of her head. "I never said it had to be a prince."

Holly frowned. "But you said—"

"A *king's son*."

"Isn't that what a prince is?" Dominic's voice was just as confused as she felt.

"Oh, no. Not necessarily." Lily waved their words away. "There are many ways a king might have a son: birth, adoption, marriage. In only one of those is the son a prince to begin with."

Holly glanced up at Dominic, who just shook his head. "I still don't understand," she said. "Nic is the son of a duke."

"Until he proposed, and you accepted, at which point he became, for all intents and purposes, the son of a king."

"But I never actually proposed." Dominic's face was adorably befuddled, and Holly squeezed him closer.

Lily noticed the reaction and her eyes twinkled. "It was close enough. The intention and affection was there on both sides."

Holly let the words sink in for a moment. "So the curse really is broken." Her head flew up and she leaned forward. "Wait! My family! What about them?"

"I'll go about waking them up in a moment," Lily said cheerfully. "I thought I would give you two lovebirds a moment to yourselves first before forcing dear Dominic to meet the whole family at once. You've had quite a while to get to know

each other, but the last thing your family will remember is your sixteenth birthday.”

Holly glanced over her shoulder at Dominic. His face was slightly pale, but he gave her a brave smile. She squeezed his hand before turning her attention back to the Fairy. “Why were they asleep? I thought the curse only affected me.”

“It did, my dear, which is why you were the only one awake. I wasn’t aware of that particular consequence until a year ago when I returned to check on you, or I would have come much sooner. But I put the castle to sleep after you succumbed because your parents were worried about you waking up in a strange place with no familiar faces—not to mention the fact that you were completely defenseless.”

“You were How the whole time?” Holly’s stomach did a strange flip at this revelation. “So are Who and the others...?”

“Oh, they’re owls, my dear. Nothing to fear there. And such bright, intelligent birds. Once I realized that you were awake every night, I decided that the best way for me to keep an eye on you was to join them. Who was quite protective at first; it took a lot of groveling and promises on my part to get past her defenses.”

Holly’s heart warmed at the thought, and she smiled.

“Well,” Lily said brightly. “I better go wake up your parents. It’s going to be a very happy Deus Natus Day indeed!” She turned to leave with a bounce in her step. “Oh, and by the way, Holly—happy birthday.” With a wink, she was gone.

Holly turned around to face Dominic. His blue eyes were warm with affection, and he brought her hand up, pressing a kiss to the back of it. “Happy Deus Natus, Holly. And happy birthday. This makes you what...one hundred and sixteen?” He shook his head with a teasing smirk. “I’m afraid you might be much too old for me.”

She tugged her hand free and crossed her arms, lifting her chin into the air. “I’m twenty-six. Sleeping hours don’t count, and as I was only awake for eighty-seven thousand, seven hundred and twenty of those hours, which comes out to roughly ten years.”

The teasing smile fell from Dominic’s face, replaced instead by tender, sympathetic concern. “Ten years is a long time to be alone, Holly Joy.”

“I wasn’t alone the whole time. I had Parliament. And your letters. And then you.”

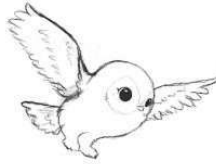
He pulled her close. “And now the curse is broken, and you won’t be alone again.”

“Exactly.” Holly beamed up at him. “You were right, you know.”

“About what?” He brushed a lock of hair behind her ear.

“Deus Natus *is* the perfect time for miracles.”

Epilogue



Deus Natus Eve, one year later...

“Holly! Where are you, love? We’re going to be late!” Dominic’s voice echoed down the hall towards the study where Holly had hidden away with a book, content to escape the hustle and bustle of Lizzie’s annual Deus Natus party. Though she had claimed at first that she never wanted to be alone again, Holly soon found that after ten years of near-complete solitude, large crowds and lots of noise overwhelmed her quite easily. She much preferred the silence of the library and the company of only a few close friends.

“He’s coming!” she whispered to Who, who sat perched on the mantel. Stockings once again hung in front of the hearth, evidence of the snow-filled activities that had been going on earlier that day.

“Holly?” Dominic’s voice was just outside the door, and Holly quickly stretched out on the couch, closing her eyes and clutching her book to her chest as if she had fallen asleep while reading. She worked to keep her breathing soft and even as her husband’s footsteps drew near.

“Holly, love, that won’t work on me.” Amusement laced his words. “I’ve seen you when you’re sleeping; I know when you’re awake.”

Holly cracked one eye open and formed her lips into a pout. “But what if I wanted True Love’s Kiss to wake me up?”

“Oh, well, in that case...” Dominic bent over and granted her request.

Who let out a hoot of protest, and they both laughed. Holly sat up, smoothing out her hair. “We’ve been married for more than six months now, Who. You’ve had plenty of time to get used to it.”

The owl rustled her feathers in response and took off through the open door, doubtless to find the rest of Parliament.

“Are you ready?” Dominic asked, taking a seat beside her on the couch.

Holly blew out a long breath. “I think so. It’s just for a little while, and it’s so late that most people will probably be too tired to want to stay long and talk.”

“And if they do, just tell them your husband is tired and wants to go to bed.”

“Ha!” Holly shook her head wryly. “You’re a regular night owl. It’s why you and the Parliament get along so well.”

“No, that’s just because we both love you.” Dominic wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pressed a kiss to her temple.

“But if you weren’t a night owl, you would never have been awake in the middle of the night breaking into people’s homes and leaving them gifts, which means we

never would have met, so I suppose it's a good thing."

"A very good thing. Though I do wish you wouldn't phrase it like that."

"Like what?"

"I wasn't 'breaking in.'"

Holly raised her eyebrows pointedly. "You snuck in through doors or windows while the occupants of the house were asleep, and if there weren't any doors or windows available, you climbed down the chimney. I'm fairly certain that's the very definition of breaking in."

"But I wasn't stealing anything."

"Except from me." Holly grinned unrepentantly at the scowl he gave her, then nestled into his side. "Are you going out again tonight?"

"Perhaps to a few houses, but with the real spring and summer we had, and now with an actual king on the throne, Weihnacht is doing much better this year than it has in my lifetime."

"That's too bad. I know the children loved the toys, and I think Myran secretly loves making them."

Dominic laughed. "It's not a secret; he does. Maybe I will choose a couple houses every year, just for the children, but there's no way I could make it down every chimney in Rodel in just one night. I would need a good helping of Fairy magic, and I think I've had enough of that for my lifetime."

Holly agreed wholeheartedly. "Me, too."

A clock chimed in the hall, tolling eleven times. Dominic stood and held out a hand, easily helping Holly to her feet. "Are you ready?"

"Yes. But do you know what my favorite part of Deus Natus Eve will be?" She snaked her arms around his neck.

"What?" Dominic's arms wrapped loosely around her back.

"After the service when we come home and it's just you, me, a warm fire, and a silent night."

"It sounds perfect," he answered before dropping a kiss to her lips.

And it was.

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(A Sleeping Beauty retelling)

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Second Star to the Right

Princess of the Beans

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The Twelve Virtuosos

The Healer and the Huntsman

The Swan and the Slipper

Beauty from the Beast
